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Old Made New: Neil Gaiman's Storytelling in The Sandman

Sara Reilly

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OLD MADE NEW: NEIL GAIMAN'S
STORYTELLING IN
THE SANDMAN

By

Sara Reilly

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Introduction

Called “the most famous writer you’ve never heard of” by *The Times* (Craig), it is hard to pin down exactly what sort of author Neil Gaiman is famous for being. To this day, he is probably most known for the comics series *The Sandman*, but he has gone on to write more than comic books. He was the first author “to shatter the preconceptions of people both outside and within the [comics] industry” (Wagner 299) by making the unprecedented switch from comics to prose with *Good Omens*, a collaboration with British fantasy magnate Terry Pratchett, in 1990. Since then, Gaiman has published an assortment of nonfiction and fiction – poems, short stories, novellas, novels, graphic fiction, and comics – all aimed at different age groups. He has branched out into other media such as screenwriting and directing, television writing, and songwriting. Where Gaiman has tried, he has invariably succeeded. Since winning Best Short Fiction at the World Fantasy Convention in 1991, he has won thirty-nine other awards, including a Newbery Medal, three Hugos, and two Mythopoeic Awards (“Awards”). Although sales figures are difficult to come by, it is estimated that as of 2008 Gaiman’s *Sandman* alone had sold seven million copies (Whitehead).

Gaiman's talent was discovered by DC Comics’s liaison to Britain, Karen Berger. During one of her talent scouting trips for DC Comics in the mid-1980s, she met with Gaiman and *Sandman* covers illustrator Dave McKean to hear their pitches for several revivals of DC characters. All were spoken for until Gaiman mentioned Black Orchid, an obscure title character from the 1970s. Despite the project's approval, DC Comics expressed reservations about interest in a female protagonist and delayed publication. In order to generate a reading audience for *Black Orchid*, DC Comics suggested the pair do a monthly comic. *The Sandman* resulted.

The Sandman’s initial run lasted from 1989 until 1996. Beginning in 1990, the comics

were collected and reprinted into ten trade paperbacks. *The Sandman* remains in print to this day and is DC Comics's second-bestselling line, outsold only by Batman-Superman titles (Murphy 21). Five years after the completion of the series, Vertigo published the first of five collector's editions, entitled *The Absolute Sandman*. In addition to the original stories, Gaiman penned a spinoff miniseries, *Death* (also given a collector's edition), as well as an "eleventh" volume of short character sketches, and a graphic novel with artist Yoshitaka Amano based on Japanese folklore. The *Sandman* universe has been explored by other authors besides Gaiman in fictional spinoffs, as well as nonfiction companions and collections of illustrated covers and quotes. The film rights to both *Sandman* and *Death* titles have been optioned by Warner Bros., and a television miniseries is also being discussed, but no on-screen adaptations appear to be forthcoming.

Critics and peers have taken notice of Gaiman and his comics series, praising the quality of his storytelling. The first award the author received – Best Short Fiction at the World Fantasy Convention in 1991 – was for *Sandman* 19, a new take on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As daring and bold as a reworking of a Shakespeare classic in comics form may sound, awarding the prize was bolder: a comic book won in a category that had previously belonged to prose. It was the first comic to win in that category, and the rules were thereafter changed to ensure that it would be the last (Wagner 377). Other *Sandman* stories have been nominated for other awards: In 2000, *The Sandman: The Dream Hunters* won a Stoker Award for best "comic book, graphic novel, or other illustrated narrative," and in 2004, *The Sandman: Endless Nights* won both a Stoker Award for best illustrated narrative and a Locus Award for nonfiction/art ("Awards"). While there is not a vast amount of criticism on Gaiman's work—something Philip Sandifer and Tof Eklund attribute to the rapid canonization of Gaiman in the

realm of comics (“Editors’ Introduction”) – there is enough discussion to argue for his importance on the current literary scene. Two collections of critical essays on his work have been published, one book-length scholarly text focusing on *The Sandman* and a special issue of the University of Florida’s *ImageText* journal dedicated solely to the author. Various critical articles by scholars have also been published worldwide.

In this paper, I shall enter into the critical discussion of Gaiman’s work through an examination of his storytelling in *The Sandman*. To truly give a sense of Gaiman’s storytelling, I would hand the reader of this paper the ten *Sandman* volumes and have him or her simply read the series. *The Sandman*, to use its own terminology, is a soft place in literature, “where the geographies of dream intrude upon the real” (*Fables & Reflections* 141). In the soft places, the author, readers, and the imagination come together to make a story. This meeting of author and audience is a key part of the success of Gaiman’s storytelling. What sets Gaiman and his series apart from typical comics fiction, I argue, are his complex and innovative experiments with traditional comics forms. He draws upon and challenges established generic, narrative, and formal elements in order to appeal to a sophisticated and receptive contemporary audience. Implementing both old and new ways of telling stories, Gaiman creates an idiosyncratic style that becomes more meaningful and enjoyable with each reading.

An exhaustive examination and in-depth analysis of the entire series would be impossible to achieve in this paper, as *The Sandman* is seventy-five issues and over a quarter of a million words long. I have striven to achieve a balance between overview and close analysis that will best illustrate my argument. In chapter one, I explore Gaiman’s complicated and conflicted relationship with DC Comics and its fictional universe, creating a context for *The Sandman* as a series that has challenged conventions and rules from the start. In chapter two, I identify two

major comics traditions from which Gaiman draws – superhero and dark fantasy (horror) – and speculate on his connections to and experiments with the fantasy genre more generally. Taking examples from the series as a whole, in chapter three, I frame Gaiman’s storytelling around the general principle of an appeal to readers, and explore certain aspects which I find to be among his most interesting, original, and experimental which result from his point of view. These aspects include his employment of characterization, his use of mythopoeia and intertextuality, and his incorporation of metafictional elements. In order to show how these aspects of storytelling are also found in smaller selections of the narrative, I turn to the first collected volume, *Preludes & Nocturnes*, in chapter four. Although critical consensus claims that he does not find his unique voice until issue 8 of *Preludes & Nocturnes*, I suggest that the distinctive features of his storytelling are already present in issues 1-7, that he is in fact challenging the status quo and not writing a “conventional” comic. In an afterword, I reflect briefly on the visual storytelling in *The Sandman*.

Chapter One: Neil Gaiman and DC Comics

Although Gaiman's popularity began with *The Sandman*, the Sandman did not begin with Gaiman. The Sandman character has been licensed under DC Comics for over seventy years, and has been re-imagined through seven separate characters. The first Sandman, penned by Gardner Fox, appeared in *Adventure Comics* 40 published in 1939. As the Sandman, Wesley Dodds donned a suit, fedora, and a gas mask, and subdued criminals by using gadgets like a sleeping gas gun. Although Dodds usually worked alone, he received a sidekick for a time and joined superhero teams such as the Justice Society of America which he helped found (Greenberger 3). The Sandman gained superpowers in the hands of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby when the re-imagined character first appeared in *The Sandman* 1 in 1974. After an accident, research psychologist Dr. Garrett Sanford became trapped in the Dream Dimension, "a plane of existence on which what people see in dreams actually exists" (4). The Dream Dimension allowed for Sanford to gain abilities such as flight and super strength. He adopted the name "The Sandman" after both the title of his research project and the 1940s crimefighter. The Sanford Sandman traveled in the space between reality and dreams called the Dream Stream, and lived in the Dream Dome with his sidekicks, nightmares Brute and Glob. His nemesis was the Nightmare Wizard, a resident of the Dream Dimension (4). This Sandman lasted until 1976. Hector Hall – formerly the deceased superhero, Silver Scarab – was introduced by Roy Thomas and Jerry Ordway in 1988 to replace Sanford in *Infinity Inc* 49-51. Gaiman's Sandman character would appear the following year in *The Sandman* 1, "The Sleep of the Just."

The Sandman character under Gaiman is vastly different. Gaiman's Sandman is known by many names (not aliases), including Oneiros, Lord Shaper, King of Dreams, and Prince of Stories – but he is most often called Lord Morpheus. He equips himself with three items: a pouch

of sand, much like the Sandman of folklore; a mask that resembles Wesley Dodds', save for that it is made from the bones of an ancient god; and a ruby dreamstone that holds most of his power. Gaiman's Sandman is not a man in costume. He is a member of the Endless, a group of godlike beings that are anthropomorphic personifications of life processes. The Sandman, whose proper name is Dream, is the third oldest of the Endless. As his name implies, his responsibilities include overseeing the dreams of all living and even non-living things – for, in Gaiman's universe, everything dreams.

All of the aforementioned Sandman characters can be related to each other because of their existence within the DC Universe. They share an intertextual narrative space, meaning that there is a shared relationship between one text (in this case, a comic book issue) and other texts (e.g., preceding issues, or several issues across comic book titles) within a larger literary universe. This universe can be thought of as a literary pool from which the authors and artists draw some of their ideas. Both the Kirby-Simon Sandman and Gaiman's Sandman exemplify the intertextual nature of comics since they refer back to preexisting elements that had been previously established in the DC Universe. Intertextuality, in the form of preserved continuity, is inherent to comics series and that readers have come to expect it (Reynolds 38).

Comics series operate on the assumption that the canon (the established storylines and characters) will be upheld across titles under, and sometimes across, publisher labels. For example, when Garret Sanford named himself the Sandman after the 1940s crimefighter, this reference to Wesley Dodds was intertextual, referring back to the antecedent DC Comics character. Readers who were aware of the existence of the Golden Age title recognized this allusion, and the author who wrote the reference clearly understood its significance within the greater scope of DC Comics. Gaiman's *Sandman* incorporates all three Sandmen within the first

two storylines spanning two volumes, but his use of intertextuality is different from that of the previous example. While he respectfully acknowledges and incorporates various DC characters and settings in his work, he also steps aside from the prepackaged DC Universe in order to focus on one of his own creation.

For readers of *The Sandman* series, this transition from DC Comics to Gaiman's own narrative universe is smooth. Outside of the pages, however, Gaiman would encounter resistance from DC Comics. Some of his ideas would push at boundaries that had never before been tested. For example, after the first issue, Gaiman and McKean did not want the Sandman to appear on the front cover. DC Comics objected. Gaiman tells Hy Bender, "DC kept asking, 'But how will readers know that it's a Sandman comic if he's not on the cover?'" (24). At the time, it was nearly impossible to find a superhero comic without the title character on the cover. Gaiman and McKean were adamant and, finally, they won the argument. This was a resounding victory for *The Sandman*. "It meant we were operating outside the paradigm of comics," Gaiman comments (Bender 24). Comics are a visual medium, partly image and partly text. Taking the visual focus away from the lead character was a gutsy move – but this visual cue was important. Not only would McKean's striking covers become part of what defined *The Sandman* as a unique comics series, but they would also signal to readers that the series would not be a conventional superhero comic, if it were to be a superhero comic at all.

In addition to challenging superficial traditions, *The Sandman* would also challenge the internal practice of comics censorship. Historically, American comics publishers such as DC Comics have been censoring themselves since the adoption of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. This institution was aimed at controlling the unfavorable content in comics that had caused an uproar in parents whose children were reading them. The Comics Code's regulations are

sensitive to the depiction of institutions, groups of people, and individuals; profane and/or derogatory language; excessive violence; and graphic sexual situations. Children, comprising a large amount of comics' reading audience, are a main concern, especially after the 1989 revision (Nyberg 175). In order to bear the Comics Code Seal, which signals that the comic is "decent and wholesome," the comic must be submitted to an administrator for review (175, 178).¹ Whatever elements the Code disapproved of, or that editors felt would raise flags with audiences or the government at the time, would be rewritten.

Comics censorship was not unique to America. In Britain, the Obscene Publications Act operated in much the same way, although its enforcement was stricter. Because of this, many British comics authors and artists chose to emigrate to America to make a living. The first wave of this British Invasion began with Barry Windsor Smith, a freelance artist who worked for Marvel Comics in the 1970s, and the movement would truly gain momentum in the 1980s with leading comics talent Alan Moore (Wagner 178). Moore revolutionized the comics genre. His *Swamp Thing* was, Karen Berger remarks, "the first book to really do intelligent, adult, literary comics" (McCabe 48). Moore's work – as well as that of the other British talents who pushed the boundaries of comics fiction – was darker, grittier, and occasionally more bleak and violent than most comics had been in the past and also contained many literary allusions and popular culture references. Collectively, these authors and artists began to define a new era in comics fiction, a definition that Gaiman and other third wave talents would go on to develop.

Moore's work in particular was so impressive and of such quality that, despite violating the Comics Code, DC Comics decided to keep the series in print. To avoid legal action, the publishers printed a warning label on the cover, suggesting that *Swamp Thing* was for mature

¹ As of April 2011, DC Comics forwent the Comics Code Seal of Approval and instituted their own ratings system (Lee).

readers. Thus, the Mature Readers label was born (Murphy 12). Today, publishers allow for more mature content in their comics by way of this label. Once founded by Berger in 1993, the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics would exclusively publish comics that came with this Mature Readers label, as it intended to serve “as a venue for material of an edgier, more sophisticated nature” (“About Vertigo”). It is important to note that *The Sandman* had already received a Mature Readers label before it appeared on the Vertigo imprint, and that the label did not solve all of the conflicts over content that would occur between author and publisher.

Despite the leeway the Mature Readers label gave an author, there was some content which violated the Comics Code that DC Comics simply would not include in their stories, content which Gaiman would try to include in *The Sandman*. Gaiman recalls one instance when “I wanted [a character] to talk very clinically, coldly, and uncaringly about things like masturbation . . . After I handed in the script, though, I got a phone message from Karen [Berger, Gaiman’s editor] saying, ‘People don’t masturbate in the DC Universe.’ Taking that as a formal policy statement, I rewrote the page” (Bender 59). In the case of masturbation, he dropped the topic and accepted his editor’s authority. In the case of profanity, however, he was adamant that it was important to his vision for the story. “I’d included *fuck* in some of my previous scripts,” Gaiman explains, “but it never made it onto the published page; which was unfortunate, because I only put it in when I felt it was important to the story. So I started a little campaign, saying ‘This is ridiculous, there are scenes where I need to use that kind of language’” (Bender 24-5). By issue 64, DC Comics had relented; “The Kindly Ones: Part 8” became the first time the four-letter profanity appeared in *The Sandman* or any other Vertigo title.

There was one battle in particular that Gaiman would grow tired of fighting: the use of DC Comics’ characters. As Hank Wagner points out,

At first excited and eager at the prospect of working with established DC characters, [Gaiman] quickly became disillusioned by the problems that arose; whenever he attempted [to] use those characters, he would encounter resistance, whether it be someone rewriting his dialogue, or coping with a retroactive continuity decision about that hero or villain. After repeatedly encountering problems of this sort, Gaiman gave up, deciding to keep major DC characters offstage and create his own continuity, respectful and mindful of the DC Universe, but also clearly another, distinct, and separate part of that landscape. (27-28)

This unease with comics conventions and traditions can be seen even in Gaiman's work previous to *The Sandman*. In *Black Orchid*, there is a crucial narrative moment where the title character is confronted by the villain. This moment occurs in the first issue, and ends in the death Black Orchid. The character would be replaced by one of Gaiman's design, not tied down by previous DC storylines. Gaiman's view of traditional comics storytelling is brought to the page when, just before shooting the original Black Orchid and leaving her for dead, her murderer remarks that he knows how the situations usually works: the bad guy locks the heroine in the basement and she escapes. With this commentary

[Gaiman] is informing us all that the familiar rules of comic book storytelling – all those rules that insure the hard-earned triumph and inevitability of justice – will not apply in this narrative. Enter this story, the author is saying, and you enter a place where all the accepted customs of the genre's mythology have been suspended, and a new mythology – much closer to the dark dreams and darker realities of modern-day life – is about to be constructed. (Murphy 15)

Just as Gaiman created a new Black Orchid, he would create a new incarnation of the Sandman character. This move to re-imagine the protagonist in *The Sandman* “freed . . . [him] from the baggage of DC continuity” (Bender 24). He thus avoided the kinds of interference from the DC Comics corporation previously discussed, and also privileged his own narrative universe, allowing him to focus on the stories he wanted to tell – “a new mythology,” as Murphy writes, that appeals in many ways to the dark dreams and darker realities of a modern, sophisticated audience.

Chapter Two: Gaiman, *The Sandman*, and Fantasy Fiction

Berger, with whom Gaiman credits the decision to re-imagine the Sandman character as someone completely new (Bender 24), claims that Gaiman used the superhero comic to move his readers away from the superhero comic and into one of his own style. She argues:

Neil created the trappings of a super-hero comic, in terms of the structure, the uses of conflict, and the pacing – albeit with cooler clothes and, arguably, cooler concepts. So he got existing comics readers into a territory they were familiar with, but which was in key ways a very different territory; and then he slowly moved them further and further out to the range of the unfamiliar. (Bender 35)

These “trappings” of structure, conflict, and pacing belong to the superhero tradition from which Berger claims the first issues of *The Sandman* borrow heavily. However, the genre from which Gaiman borrows most significantly in the first issues is not superhero, but dark fantasy or horror.

Most critics would agree that *The Sandman*, like much of Gaiman’s work, falls under the category of dark fantasy, as horror or Gothic fiction are sometimes labeled. In the 1950s, EC Comics, an American firm looking to target a British audience, incorporated this tradition into its highly literary tales which contained “all the trappings of the gothic genre” (Murphy 7). These comics appealed to the emotions of fear, terror, and horror. They were meant to incite “A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” which encroached on the natural world (Lovecraft 15). The comics were so popular that the Harmful Publications Act was introduced in Britain in order to control young people’s exposure to the content, not only of these comics, but of all comics sold in the country (Murphy 7-8). It was too late, however. The comics industry had caught the dark fantasy bug. In the following decades, DC Comics would introduce its own line of horror comics such as *House of Mystery* and *Weird*

Tales, which would eventually develop into a mystery-suspense line. Gaiman lists both the EC and DC publishers and their horror titles as inspiration for *The Sandman*'s initial issues (*Preludes & Nocturnes* 238).

When Gaiman agreed to write *The Sandman*, he inherited the two traditions – superhero and dark fantasy – from the previous titles that contained the Sandman character. Wesley Dodds was featured in a comic book that was more mystery than superhero; he was not, recall, a superhero but a costumed vigilante. Over time, Dodds was incorporated into the superhero fold, interacting with the Justice Society, but never claiming superpowers. The next Sandman characters, Dr. Garrett Sanford and Hector Hall, did have superpowers and were more fantastic figures than vigilantes. While Gaiman lists both the superhero and dark fantasy genres as influences, his work cannot be fit into one category or the other. He draws from both traditions, which are themselves part of the larger category of fantasy fiction. Although Gaiman's conception and employment of fantasy deviate somewhat from traditional models, it is important to understand the context within which he works. It is not simply the superhero or horror genre which is Gaiman's mode of choice; rather, fantasy fiction is Gaiman's chosen vehicle for his unique storytelling in *The Sandman*.

Fantasy fiction has no one universal definition. Theorists, however, tend to agree upon certain recurrent aspects of the genre. The confrontation between a primary reality – the everyday world – and a secondary, supernatural realm is one such aspect. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, believes that the fantastic hinges upon “the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). The supernatural event, as the name implies, contradicts the natural laws, and thus sets the character – often the protagonist with whom the reader identifies – at odds with the world. Eric S. Rabkin

develops Todorov's definition, stating that the contradiction between the primary and secondary realms must present itself as a one hundred eighty degree reversal of perspectives (4). This means that the supernatural event which occurs in fantastic fiction must completely oppose natural law. There is no possibility of explaining the supernatural within the natural.

In addition to the reversals and conflicts which occur on the narrative level of plot and character, theorists point to another defining characteristic of fantastic fiction: the reader's response. J.R.R. Tolkien coined the term "subcreation" to refer to the imagined secondary realm a fantasy author creates for the reader. Subcreation occurs when an author "makes a Secondary World which your [the reader's] mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (Tolkien 37). Tolkien, like many other theorists of the fantastic, emphasizes the importance of the reader's response. Readers, he implies, not only participate vicariously on the level of plot by identifying with a protagonist confronted by the super- or preternatural, they also immerse themselves in the secondary, subcreated world the author creates. If they do not, the work fails.

Immersion is a crucial experience for the reader of fantasy fiction. Janet Murray relates the immersive capacity of subcreation to the human psychological predisposition for "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality" (99). Because of this predisposition, "we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience" (110). This reinforcement suggests a reader's willing participation in the narrative, not an instinctual distrust of it. Murray argues that since readers have a stake in the text, they do not suspend disbelief, as Coleridge famously claimed, but instead, actively create belief (110). This active participation of readers in fantasy fiction is complemented in the visual storytelling of the comics medium through its use of the

paneled page. Between the panels is the blank space, or gutter, and since action is not depicted in the gutter, readers must fill in their own ideas of what happened. Thus, they participate in the narrative through what Scott McCloud calls closure, which allows the reader to become “a willing and conscious collaborator” in the text (65). McCloud offers the following example:



Fig. 1. The gutter space as illustrated by Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994; print; 66). © Scott McCloud, 1993. Reproduced with permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

In the first panel, one character raises an axe, and in the next, another character screams. No corpse is shown. Readers fill the gutter space with their performances of the victim’s murder.

There are numerous examples in *The Sandman* of the filling in of the gutter space, as illustrated by McCloud above. Perhaps the most chilling pair of panels – because of its lack of detail and openness to interpretation – comes in issue 6. John Dee, an established DC Comics villain, has taken control of a twenty-four-hour diner. Murder and mayhem ensue. During the sixteenth hour of the narrative, Dee and the patrons play “Party Games. Murder in the dark...” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 175). These four panels are completely black, and the last two are the only ones that contain dialogue. In these panels, someone screams, and Dee’s characteristic laughter, as lettered by Todd Klein, follows. The lack of detail allows readers to fill in as much or as little detail as they please inside the gutter space.

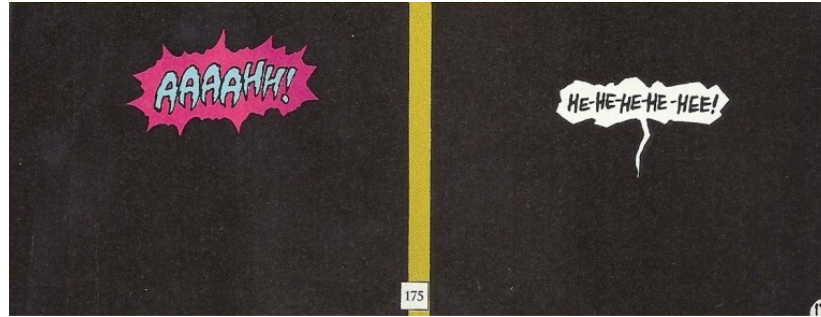


Fig. 2. Murder in the dark, panel from “24 Hours” by Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes*. (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1991; print; 175). Reproduced with permission. SANDMAN is TM & © DC Comics.

In addition to the concept of immersion, Gaiman’s experiments with the genres of superhero and dark fantasy have affinities with the ideas of theorists like Rabkin and Gary K. Wolfe, who argue for a conception of fantasy as a genre without borders. Rabkin identifies the influence of the fantastic in such different genres as science, utopian, and detective fiction (118). Wolfe argues that the fantastic is present in all modes of fiction (29). From this point of view, fantasy is transgressive, blurring distinctions between traditionally separated narrative modes. Likewise, for Gaiman, fantasy is not a matter of generic elements, rules, and self-reflexive traditions. Instead, it is about taking words and building worlds within “an infinite playroom, of a sort, in which the only boundaries are those of the imagination” (Gaiman, “Just Four Words” 1, 3). So although Gaiman can be labeled an author of superhero and dark fantasy, his use of the fantastic is much broader than in works typical of the genre.

This broadening of content and conception reflects Gaiman’s attraction to formal experimentation. I would argue that *The Sandman* exemplifies Robert Scholes’s concept of “fabulation.” At once playful and serious, fabulative works upset the status quo and

violate, in various ways, standard novelistic expectations by drastic – and sometimes highly effective – experiments with subject matter, form, style, temporal sequence, and fusions of the everyday, the fantastic, the mythical, and

the nightmarish, in renderings that blur traditional distinctions between what is serious or trivial, horrible or ludicrous, tragic or comic. (Abrams 232)

The Sandman's blurring of distinctions between traditional generic, narrative, tonal, and stylistic elements opens up a narrative space in which the boundaries used to create a sense of order in our world are erased. On a textual level, this blurring is evident in how Gaiman employs dark fantasy, blending the primary (real) and secondary (supernatural) worlds in such a way as to eliminate conventional distinctions between them. "In [Gaiman's] narratives," Clive Barker writes, "the whole world is haunted and mysterious. There is no solid status quo, only a series of relative realities, personal to each of the characters, any or all of which are frail and subject to eruptions from other states and conditions" ("Introduction"). He refers to such a kind of fiction as "fantastique" ("Introduction"), and while it sounds quite similar to other kinds of fantastic fiction – namely Gothic and dark fantasy – there is one crucial difference: Gaiman does not separate the realms of fantasy and reality; instead, he presents them as parts of a single whole.

For traditional theorists like Todorov and Rabkin, fantasy consists of two realms, and the fantastic occurs when the boundary between the two is crossed. For Gaiman, there is no boundary. The constant invasion (and often subversive infiltration) of what is generally thought of as the super- or preternatural world in *The Sandman* points to the fact that these "primary" and "secondary" realities are not separate from one another but, in fact, constitute a single Reality. That is, the world in which Gaiman immerses readers is not a secondary fantasy world but a single complex realm in which the everyday shares space with the uncanny, and the realm of fiction shares space with the real world. In *The Sandman*, what is normally termed the "primary reality" is called the waking world, and it is constantly being "invaded" by beings that would generally belong to a second world. The main "secondary" realm in *The Sandman*, however, is

the Dreaming, where all of reality's dreams, myths and stories, and other fictional/fantastic entities reside. Instead of being separate, the Dreaming is a reflection of the waking world, just as the waking world is a reflection of the Dreaming.

Inhabitants of the Dreaming “cross over” easily into the waking world. Take, for example, the Corinthian, a nightmare created by Dream to serve as the dark mirror of humanity. Instead of being introduced in our dreams, the Corinthian first appears in *The Doll's House* as a serial killer, highly respected among his peers. He blends in seamlessly with the real world, provided that his one distinguishing feature – his mouths-for-eyes – is hidden from the world behind dark sunglasses. While the Corinthian is originally of the Dreaming, he contains elements of the waking world, enters into the “primary” realm, and is accepted easily by the other characters. Other supernatural characters like angels, demons, gods, and goddesses are already natural inhabitants of the waking world and go unnoticed by other characters. There are also extraordinary humans who appear to be as normal as you or me, but are in fact hundreds or thousands of years old. What boundaries do exist between our world and “supernatural” realms such as the Dreaming, Hell, and the Silver City (home to angels) are fragile. In fact, there is little in the way of boundaries at all. Reversals occur throughout the course of the narrative – volume to volume, issue to issue, and sometimes even inside single issues – so that, for the reader, it is not so much a suspension of disbelief that must occur, but a suspension of expectation. Accepting that things will change at the whim of the author, readers allow themselves to be immersed in Gaiman's fabulative fantastique narrative.

Chapter Three: Gaiman's Storytelling in *The Sandman*

Hank Wagner reminds us “in the world according to Neil Gaiman, story is paramount” (5). No matter the medium, Gaiman is, first and foremost, a storyteller. With *The Sandman*, he deliberately worked with flexible and innovative conventions of comics fantasy fiction by viewing *The Sandman* from the beginning as an opportunity to tell stories that “would go anywhere, from the real to the surreal, from the most mundane tales to the most outrageous” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 237). This open view of what storytelling in a comics series could be had a drastic effect on readers, as *The Sandman* introduced the world of comics to readers who never would have picked up a “funny book” before. Part of its appeal lie in its promotion of smart and complex storytelling in the comics industry. While Gaiman admits that he “writes for very small audiences” (Elder 187), his audience is in fact very large, as proven by the above figures reported by Murphy and Whitehead. Gaiman's approach to storytelling results in a rich and rewarding experience for the reader, for, as others have identified, he does not “write down” to his audience. Instead, he “respects the reader's intelligence, and he tests the very limits of that intelligence” (Murphy 18). This appeal to and challenge of a receptive and attentive audience lies at the heart of the construction of *The Sandman*, and the characteristic elements of storytelling result from this appeal.

Gaiman's narrative is so well-crafted and complex that subsequent readings – another challenge for the reader – are often necessary to grasp the full scope of his work. That rereadings of *The Sandman* are still enjoyable for readers is an indication of its merits as a sophisticated comic book series and as a good story. Part of the reason rereadings of the series are enjoyable is that they allow for readers to shift focus from the overall plot of story (with which they are now familiar) to other details. Many of the details in *The Sandman* come in the form of numerous

intertextual allusions to myths, folktales, and fairy tales, and references in both text and illustration to popular films, television shows, and music above and beyond what one would normally expect in a comics series. Gaiman is comfortable alluding to the wider canon of literature and history – dropping lines from Milton and Yeats, writing Chaucer and Shakespeare into his stories, and using historical figures both well-known (e.g., Marco Polo) and obscure (e.g., Norton I, the first emperor of the United States). As Philip Sandifer and Tok Eklund point out, Gaiman’s skillful use of such materials makes *The Sandman* not just a newsstand comic but an effective and sophisticated narrative (“Editors Introduction”). Many of these allusions and references are easily passed over on a first reading, making a subsequent readings more meaningful for a reader who recognizes those that had previously gone unnoticed.

To get a sense of how intricate *The Sandman* can be, here is an example from issue 27, “Season of Mists: Chapter 6.” In the issue, Dream defeats the demon Azazel, captures him in a bottle, and places it inside a chest. The corresponding panel is pictured below:



Fig. 3. Dream places Azazel in a chest, panel from Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Season of Mists* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1992; print; 188.) Reproduced with permission. SANDMAN is TM & © DC Comics.

With the defeat of the villain, the plot’s climax has been reached and the narrative’s resolution is nearly complete. Upon first reading *The Sandman*, a reader could easily skip over this panel, nothing of immediate importance visible. A closer look will reveal, however, that the items in the

chest foreshadow certain events. Prominent in the image is a city in a bottle, which will feature in issue 50, “Ramadan.” In that issue, Caliph Harun al-Rashid of Baghdad realizes that his magical city will one day decay and fall. In order to prevent this from happening, al-Rashid makes a bargain with Dream for Baghdad to be preserved forever, resurrected in stories like *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the foreground of the panel is a golden fob watch which will appear in issue 54, “The Golden Boy.” In this issue, re-imagined DC character Prez Rikard dies and is granted the ability to move between the Americas of parallel worlds by Dream. To show his gratitude, Prez gives Dream a golden fob watch. Attentive readers will recognize the Corinthian’s skull to the left of the panel from the previous arc, *The Doll’s House*, but the skull will reappear in the penultimate volume, *The Kindly Ones*, in which the character is resurrected.

Few details are wasted in *The Sandman*, although not all details have specific thematic or narrative significance. Sometimes, Gaiman shares a joke with the audience, a playful wink and a smile. In *Brief Lives*, for example, as Dream’s youngest sister, Delirium, enters a fetish club looking for her sister, “Tear in Your Hand” by Tori Amos plays in the background. This is not the sort of music one would expect to find in such a place, but it is the sort of music a reader in the know would associate with Gaiman, since the song contains the lyrics (not pictured in the panels) “if you need me me and neil’ll be hangin’ out with the DREAM KING Neil says hi by the way” (Amos, “Tear,” original emphasis).² When asked about the purpose of the many allusions in one of his works in an online interview, Gaiman admits “mostly those allusions are there for me. I don’t expect everyone to get them, but they will make a few people very happy”

² Many readers believe that Delirium is based on Tori Amos, but while there are resemblances in appearance and mannerisms, Gaiman has repeatedly denied any direct correlation between the character and her person, although Gaiman and Amos repeatedly make reference to each other in their respective works and each is inspired by the other. For an audience knowledgeable about both artists, these allusions supplement and enrich the reading experience of *The Sandman*. For further reading, see S. Alexander Reed’s article in the special issue of *ImageText*.

(“Neil Tweets”). References like those to Amos are an example of these kinds of allusions.

Gaiman’s comment shows his desire to present stories that he likes to tell the way he likes to tell them, but also stories which engage readers on various levels. Formally, Gaiman’s plots are deliberately crafted, as the foreshadowing in issue 27 shows; but there are also other layers of significance which inform a second, supplemental reading of the text.

Gaiman’s construction of the protagonist, Dream, is a case in point. On the level of character, he is rounded, dynamic, and three-dimensional, motivated by his obligations to his duties and responsibilities connected to the Dreaming, while also concerned with matters outside of his realm. Dream’s emotional connections to other characters can be seen in his interactions with his family, particularly with Death as portrayed in issue 8, “The Sound of Her Wings.” Dream’s attachment to characters extends beyond familial obligation and into love and friendship. In “Men of Good Fortune,” issue 13, Dream strikes up an unlikely friendship with Hob Galding in 1389. After convincing Death to leave Hob alone until he is ready to die, Dream meets with Hob every hundred years to talk. Dream has also had a string of lovers – including a personification of a star, a thousand year old witch, and an African princess – although he is not at all successful in any relationship.

Although Dream normally appears as a pale-skinned man with darkened eyes, dressed in a flowing black robe, he appears differently to different characters. In issue 5, “Passengers,” Dream appears to Justice League member J’onn J’onzz as a flaming disembodied head, presumably the Martians’ depiction of the Dream King. Nuala, the African princess with whom Dream fell in love, sees Dream as an African prince in issue 9, “Tales in the Sand.” In “A Dream of a Thousand Cats,” issue 18, the feline leader of a resistance group bent on taking back power from humans visits a giant black cat who is also Dream.



Fig. 4. Composite image of Dream's various appearances from top left, clockwise, *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*, *The Sandman: The Doll's House*, *The Sandman: Dream Country* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1990-5; print; 146, 20, 197, 55.) Reproduced with permission. SANDMAN is TM & © DC Comics.

In addition to taking on different appearances, Dream often does not appear at all. One of the most unique features of *The Sandman* is that the titular character is not always the most important or prominent character in a given story. He is at the heart of many story arcs, but there are many issues in which prominence is given to other featured characters, and even entire issues where Dream does not make a single appearance. Because of how Gaiman has defined his character – the Lord of Dreams, not confined to a single appearance or even a corporeal body – Dream does not have to be present in the panels to be involved in the narratives. Where there are stories and dreams, there is Lord Morpheus. Gaiman's reasoning for these various depictions is to show that Dream has no fixed appearance or meaning, but instead, like dreams and stories, is open to interpretation.

The Sandman's character is enhanced by his being given symbolical and allegorical meaning through his inclusion, as Dream, in the mythic pantheon of The Endless. In order of age, the Endless are: Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium (who

was once Delight). Although they function as anthropomorphic personifications of life processes, none of the Endless are one-dimensional characters. Each has his or her or its own personality. The Endless are capable of dying (although they are always succeeded by another aspect of themselves) and they are capable of making mistakes. They even can stop being themselves, and walk away from their duties. A sizeable part of *The Sandman* is devoted to relating their interactions and conflicts, and especially to Dream's connections with each of them. They interact on an emotional level, and these emotions bring about conflicts and concords between them. Desire, for example, often instigates the narrative conflicts presented to Dream in the series. Because of their rivalry (not explained until *Endless Nights*), Desire causes a dream vortex that by its very existence threatens to destroy the entire universe, which is the main plot of *The Doll's House*. Desire also tricks Dream into killing his son, thus evoking the wrath of the Furies in *The Kindly Ones*. The absence of Destruction – the only one to choose to walk away from his duties – affects the entire pantheon on a personal level. In *Brief Lives*, Delirium, enlisting the help of Dream, sets out to find her missing brother, and the events play out in a highly significant way for Dream.

Despite their engaging, individualized, three-dimensional characterizations, Gaiman does not allow readers to forget the symbolical and allegorical implications of the Endless. For example, when Death explains that what happens after a person dies “depends on who you are. And you never get to learn what happens to anyone else” (Gaiman, *Worlds End* 110), she articulates Gaiman's own speculation on what it is to die. Similarly, Gaiman presents what it is to dream, desire, despair, and so on. By viewing each of the Endless within his, her, or its own respective realm, readers are invited to ruminate on what these ideas represent in relation to themselves and their lives. Destruction, for example, has turned away from his realm because of

the modern use of atomic weapons, bringing the issue of modern warfare to the fore. It is Dream's realm, of course, which is the most detailed in the series and the most pertinent to my analysis, since the Dreaming contains the human imagination and is the source of our stories. "Everybody has a secret world inside of them," one character tells another after having journeyed through her own dreamworld (Gaiman, *A Game of You* 181). These secret worlds correspond to dreams, and dreams are inextricably bound up with stories. No matter how amorphous and unstable they appear to be, it remains a constant, ordering principle in Gaiman's fictional universe that there will always be stories.

"As Neil built his stories," former President of DC Comics Paul Levitz writes, "he built the myths, using the same essential power that the storyteller before the fire conjured with so long ago – the power that Neil wields so well" ("Introduction"). Storytelling and myth, as Levitz suggests, are interconnected; in fact, the Greek word *mythos* translates as "story." For ages, myth has been transmitted through stories and their telling, and critics like Stephen Rauch have connected Gaiman's work to modern mythology. Gaiman has embraced the mythological aspect of his work, although in his own characteristic manner. In a 1991 interview with Alex Amado, Gaiman said, "One of the things that I wanted to do when I started *Sandman* was to do a comic that was self-consciously mythological. It's been really fun because you can play with all the mythologies that have gone by, and with the mythologies that are springing up in the 20th century." The first sentence legitimizes Rauch's claim, but the second speaks more to my analysis in that it reveals that the impetus behind his mythic constructions was to allow Gaiman to play with story elements. This notion of play, a quintessential aspect of Gaiman's storytelling, recalls his idiosyncratic definition of fantasy mentioned in the last chapter.

Rather than a mythological writer, it is more useful and accurate to describe Gaiman as a

mythopoeic writer, a description that aligns him with modernist authors such as Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats; popular culture icons such as comics author/illustrator Jack Kirby; and filmmakers such as George Lucas. The term mythopoeia (or mythopoesis, as also used in this context) was first coined by J.R.R. Tolkien. As explained by Henry Slochower, the term is taken “from the Greek *poien*, meaning to make, to create” and refers to the “re-creat[ion] of the ancient stories” (15). Slochower distinguishes mythopoesis from mythology, arguing that while “mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoesis transposes them to a symbolic meaning” (15). Mythopoesis, then, is purely literary; it does not present itself as truth, but as symbolism. The old stories are made new. That is, the old myths are re-appropriated by a modern author and recreated for a modern audience. Gaiman’s efforts, in fact, have been twice recognized by the Mythopoeic Society, founded in 1967 in order to support such literature (“Awards”).

It has been argued by Rauch and others that *The Sandman* speaks to what many myth and popular culture theorists have recognized as a lack of the numinous or spiritual-religious experience in modern day life, supplying readers with a new mythology. This does not appear to be of primary concern to Gaiman. The Endless may be godlike beings, but they are not gods. When they are worshipped, it does not end well. Despair, for example, was worshipped by a sect called The Unforgiven, which “persisted for two years, until its last adherent finally killed himself, having survived the other members by almost seven months” (Gaiman, *Season of Mists* 21). The Endless were not meant to be worshipped and placed above mortals. As Dream tells Desire in issue 16, “We of the endless are the servants of the living – we are NOT their masters. WE exist because they know, deep in their hearts, that we exist” (*The Doll’s House* 226, original emphasis). As the Endless have dual existence – as characters within the narrative and as symbolic representations of ideas and life processes – they incite both human interest and

philosophical speculation on the part of readers. In the end – and this is the underlying premise of Gaiman’s mythopoeia – life is ultimately known, to the extent that it can be known at all, through stories.

Stories and storytelling are used in different ways and perform various functions in *The Sandman*. On a formal level, Gaiman self-consciously draws on works like Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, using storytelling as a narrative and structural device. In Gaiman’s overarching narrative, characters create their own narrative spaces by telling each other stories. These frame narratives can be simple. For example, in *The Doll’s House* a character fashioned on the image of author G. K. Chesterton tells Rose Walker the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The frame narratives can also be extremely complicated. At the end of the eighth volume’s final issue, readers learn that, at the most complicated point, they were reading a story within a story within a story within a story within a story. Confused? At the beginning of the volume, Brant and Charlene get into a car accident and seek shelter from a bizarre snowstorm in July. They arrive at Worlds’ End, a free house, where all sorts of people and creatures have convened to tell each other stories to pass the time. One patron’s story includes his own story in which a character tells a story about a character who has told a story. Then, at the very end, the whole volume is revealed to have been a story that Brant has told to a barkeeper. These final pages retroactively inform the earlier story and call attention to the levels of storytelling that have occurred in the pages.

Stories, storytelling, authors, and audience appear repeatedly as subjects and motifs in *The Sandman*. Some characters are stories – Cain and Abel, for instance – and others are authors – Mark Twain, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Shakespeare all appear in the series. Most important is the series’ protagonist, Dream, whose duties include overseeing the Dreaming. The

Dreaming is not just about the visions that come with sleep, for Dream is also the Prince of Stories and the Dreaming is where these stories reside. In addition to being populated with storybook characters and story-like characters from our dreams and nightmares, the Dreaming also contains a library which has every book ever written and every book that never was. If the book was dreamt of, thought up, or wished for, it is featured in its entirety in the library. An example of this kind of book is “*the Bestselling Romantic Spy Thriller I used to think about on the bus that would sell a billion copies and mean I’d never have to work again*” (Gaiman, *The Kindly Ones* 2). There is more to the appearance of stories and storytelling than thematization, however. They can also serve as vehicles for self-conscious speculation, that is, they can be metafictional in nature.

Metafiction is the last aspect of Gaiman’s storytelling in *The Sandman* that I shall mention here. Contemporary critics and theorists have proposed various terms besides metafiction – surfiction, self-aware fiction, and fabulation, among others – to refer to a narrative that “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). Chris Dowd notes that metafictional narratives can serve to frame other stories; can include some form of commentary on authors, audiences, or stories themselves; and/or can consist of a character breaking the fourth wall (104). He emphasizes that, generally speaking, metafiction has been used for humorous or ironic purposes; “there is a wink-wink, nudge-nudge effect . . . as the characters let *you* know that *they* know they are just fictional characters” (104, original emphasis). There is a prime example of this in comics fiction: Marvel’s Deadpool often breaks the fourth wall with sarcastic or scathing comments that are meant to elicit a chuckle from the audience. Gaiman, however, as Dowd correctly points out, does not employ metafiction in this

manner. For Gaiman, metafiction is a serious formal and thematic element which he uses to comment seriously on the nature of stories and storytelling. A number of stories in *The Sandman* self-reflexively comment on themselves as stories – as well as on the process of their telling, on authors, and on readers/audiences. By identifying Dream as both the Prince of Stories and the King of Dreams, Gaiman provides a narrative basis for self-conscious speculation on the connections between stories, dreams, and reality.

By their nature as projections of our unconscious, dreams are uncontrollable, often chaotic and amorphous. They constantly slip from our grasp and we cannot trust them. In classical myth, dreams were divided into two classes: true and false; true dreams originated from the Gate of Horn and false dreams came from the Gate of Ivory. These Gates are featured as early as issue 2 of *The Sandman* as part of the Dreaming, and their keys are held by Dream. By being in control of these gates, as well as being in control of the Dreaming, Dream introduces the concept of order to this chaotic realm. By juxtaposing chaos and order, Gaiman allegorizes the nature and meanings of stories and their telling. Metafiction, as with fabulation, breaks down the barriers between fiction and reality and reflects fiction's random, disordered, and nonlinear qualities. Peter Stoicheff considers this randomness itself a kind of order (92), but for Gaiman, the sort of order which Dream represents is not random, but controlled. However, while Gaiman's Sandman is the King of Dreams, he is only the Prince of Stories. In *The Doll's House*, Rose Walker becomes a vortex, a powerful entity capable of destroying the universe by taking control of all dreams. In this situation, Dream concedes, there is someone more powerful than himself in his own realm that he does not fully understand. "Once in every era," he explains, "there is a vortex. Even I do not know why . . . A mortal who, briefly, becomes . . . the center . . . of the dreaming" (Gaiman, *Doll's House* 208). Whoever the dream vortex is, then, is more

powerful than the Lord of Dreams. Reading this metafictionally, humans are the Kings (and Queens) of Stories – after all, the author has more power than the character he created, and the reader has more power than the author, having the ability to choose when to stop reading.

There are two metafictional motifs that are present from the beginning of *The Sandman* that recur often throughout the series: lies and endings. As I will discuss their first appearances in the next chapter, here I will mention a few instances of their recurrences later in the series. The first motif introduces “the very basic philosophy that writers are liars” (Elder 73). “Writers are liars,” Erasmus Fry claims in issue 17 as he reneges on his promise to the captured Calliope of Greek myth (Gaiman, *Dream Country* 17). In issue 19, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” as Puck is watching Shakespeare’s play being performed, he exclaims, “It never happened; yet it is still true” (*Dream Country* 75). In issue 38, “The Hunt,” while a grandfather is telling his daughter a story which may or may not be true, he warns her never to trust the storyteller (*Fables* 89). Gaiman himself comments on the motif by saying “One does not hold up any kind of an accurate mirror to life when you write or you create fiction. You are by definition lying. But you may as well try and hold up a distorting mirror that gives an illusion of something vaguely approaching reality” (Elder 73). While Gaiman is of the belief that writers are liars, his fiction questions whether or not there is any difference between fiction and reality in the first place. Just as the Dreaming is inseparably interconnected with the waking world, so “lies” (fiction) are intertwined with truth (reality).

The sense of an ending – or closure – is an essential part of any narrative. It will either support or fracture the apparent linearity of the plot structure. As readers encounter a text, they read for clues towards an end, threads to bring meaning and purpose to what they are reading. They sort through the details they believe are significant or not, and constantly update their

judgment as they read another detail, a process often referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Brooks 94). It is ultimately the ending which brings meaning to the entirety of the text and as such “it is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. Any narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text” (109-10). Unusual for a comics series, Gaiman’s *Sandman* does have a definitive end, one for which readers can read as they go along, and for which they can find more significant details upon subsequent readings.

“[I]f you keep them going long enough, they [stories] always end in death” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 162), or so believes one character in the series. This line is prophetic. Not only does the issue in which that line appears end in the deaths of all but one character, but the larger story – the story of the Sandman himself – will end in death. In issue 69, the Sandman that readers have come to know dies. He is replaced by another aspect of himself – another “point of view” (*The Wake* 44) – but it is clear that Lord Morpheus is dead. The next volume, *The Wake*, deals with the death of Morpheus and his replacement by Daniel. A funerary ceremony is held over three issues and the remaining three wrap up some loose ends. In the penultimate issue, readers are told “Only the phoenix arises and does not descend. And everything changes. And nothing is truly lost” (*Wake* 144). There are always endings, but that does not mean that stories are lost. In the issue that follows, the final issue, *Dream* is not presented as Daniel, but as Morpheus. He speaks some of the last words of the series to William Shakespeare, who has written two plays for him: “I am Prince of stories, Will; but I have no story of my own. Nor shall I ever” (*Wake* 182), but readers know that is not quite true. They have been reading *Dream*’s story all along.

In presenting these two motifs, lies and endings, to his audience, Gaiman invites readers to speculate on larger questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. It is often in

subsequent readings that these larger questions will become clear, and attentive readers will begin to read for answers to these questions within the narrative. As such, these motifs serve as rewards for attentive reading, and are examples of the ways in which Gaiman both values his reader's intelligence and seeks to engage his audience in a sophisticated and intelligent manner.

Chapter Four: A Close Reading of *Preludes and Nocturnes*

For critics and commentators, issue 8, “The Sound of Her Wings,” is the stand-out issue of *Preludes & Nocturnes*, serving as the comparative base by which the previous seven are judged. Although I will argue that the entirety of *Preludes & Nocturnes* should be held to the same quality as the rest of the series, it is easy to see why the final issue in the volume is so highly regarded. By the time this issue was released, *The Sandman* was finally selling well – so well, in fact, that it surpassed any other comic book of its kind since the 1970s (Bender 37). With the threat of cancellation due to low readership eliminated, Gaiman claims, “I was able to take a close look at what I was trying to do and make very specific plans” (Bender 37); as a result, issue 8 was “the first story in the sequence I felt was truly mine, and in which I knew I was beginning to find my own voice” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 238). Gaiman’s own voice in the issue has been identified by Bender as a shift “from plot development to mood and character development” (30), and by Berger not only as the use of a winning original character and the lack of expected and stale DC characters, but also as “the element of humanity and interpersonal relationships,” which Berger felt was absent from Gaiman’s previous issues (“Introduction”).

In many ways, these commentators are correct in identifying “The Sound of Her Wings” as a clean break from the issues which preceded it. Overall, it does focus on mood and character in a way that had not been done before in *The Sandman*, as well as on a relationship between two characters that was rooted in emotions rather than physical conflict. This tonal shift is visually evident on the first page. In the opening scene, there is no gothic mansion, no hand in the shadows, no drama in Arkham Asylum, as previous issues had begun. Instead, Dream is shown feeding pigeons. The color in the opening pages of this issue is also brighter and lighter than in previous issues and there is more space on the page. The visuals are indicative of Gaiman’s

conception of the purpose of the issue. Gaiman conceived of “The Sound of Her Wings” as an epilogue to the first story arc (*Preludes* 238). The series had just concluded a three-issue intense mini-arc battle between the Sandman and John Dee. Before that, the Sandman had been doing battle with demons from hell and escaped nightmares from his realm. The lack of conflict in the opening pages of issue 8, as well as the inclusion of space and bright colors, prepares readers for a different kind of story. Unlike in previous issues, there are no villains, battles, or magical items in issue 8. The focus is on Dream and his interaction with his elder sibling, Death.

After defeating his enemies and regaining his tools of power, Dream is lost. Death, concerned about him, invites him along while she performs her own duties and reminds him that he, too, has responsibilities to perform. What stands out the most in issue 8 is not the tonal shift in narrative, but the introduction of the character of Death. She is not what readers had been expecting – and Gaiman delights in this fact. Since Dream’s elder sibling was first mentioned in issue 1, readers had been writing in to the author, asking “When are we going to meet the Sandman’s older brother Death?” (Elder 64). The choice of a female Death was deliberate on Gaiman’s part. “Death really became female because I wanted to fuck with the innate sexism of language up front,” he says, going on to mention how fans tended to assume that Death was male (Elder 64-5).

Gaiman also chose to go against fans’ expectations about Death’s personality. He comments, “If you know the Sandman is a brooding, Byronic figure all in black and you know that he is Death’s younger brother, then you say to yourself ‘Jesus, then what is Death going to be like?’ You start conjuring up someone a hundred times more Byronic, a hundred times more dressed in black, a hundred times more dangerous” (Elder 64). Instead of feeding into these expectations, Gaiman made Death a foil to her brother. Although she appears pale-skinned and

clothed in black, there is nothing of Dream's somber personality about her. She proves this by, only a few sentences into her appearance, quoting from *Mary Poppins* – something the morose and distant Dream would never do. Death's large personality, full of smiles and cheer, presents a stark contrast to Dream, who rarely smiles and almost never laughs.



Fig. 5. Death and Dream, panel from Neil Gaiman, “The Sound of Her Wings,” *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1991; print; 214). Reproduced with permission. SANDMAN is TM & © DC Comics.

Death is instantly likeable; she is warm and welcoming, described by Berger as “adorable” but also “ultimately pragmatic” (“Introduction”). It is the mixture of approachability and relatability with intelligence and a no-nonsense approach to life and living that has attracted readers to Death. She is among the most beloved characters of the series, and it is *Sandman*'s female audience – the largest of any female audience in comics (Wagner 30) – who most appreciate her strength. In separate introductions to two volumes of *Death* comics, both Tori Amos and Claire Danes praise Death for her positive approach to life and loving acceptance of all people. Death has even set a fashion trend, her appearance and style inspiring Goth girls to strive to be like her (Bender 10-1).

The contrast in personalities between Dream and Death allows Dream to come to his epiphany at the end of issue 8. “My sister has a function to perform, even as I do,” Dream realizes from the day spent with her; “The Endless have their responsibilities. I have

responsibilities” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 230). The conflict within Dream was not solved by going out and defeating a villain. It was not made better by recovering his tools. This is what created Dream’s problem in the first place. Dream’s responsibilities extend further than simply fighting crime in a city or executing a personal agenda. As his sister reminds him – and readers – Dream is the embodiment of a function, of an idea, and he is reminded of this by his sister. The point at which Gaiman’s Sandman truly becomes Dream of the Endless is the point at which he begins to interact and connect with his sister. Perhaps this is why critics embrace issue 8. There is a palpable change in tone and character and an overt introduction to his mythological frame. “The Sound of Her Wings,” after all, is the first time that the Endless and their functions are discussed at length. Death is readers’ first introduction to the Endless as a family, and that she has her own distinct personality suggests that the other siblings are also fully developed characters. They are not stock characters or types, but full-fledged personalities.

Preludes and Nocturnes, barring its last issue, is often considered inferior to the rest of the *Sandman* series. One of the most common criticisms is that its issues are highly conventional and formulaic. In fact, the volume is very rich, containing all of the experimental and playful aspects of Gaiman’s storytelling which were touched upon in the last chapter. Much of *Sandman* 1-7 drew from the pre-established DC universe, allowing Gaiman to pay tribute to the preexisting characters and narrative styles of the comics tradition, but also to legitimize his work with comics fans and gain an audience. Overall, the issues that make up the first volume of stories can be said to be highly conventional, but it is often overlooked that, even within the conventions of DC Comics, Gaiman adds his own twists. Karen Berger, who considers issue 8 to be the diverging point in the series, recognizes this. She says of the first volume:

In rereading the first storyline of the series, I was struck by a dichotomy. On the

one hand, the first seven issues were a simple quest tale about the once-captive ruler of the dreamworld featuring known DC characters and their haunts in known roles. Revenge, battle, quest fulfilled. Conventional stuff? Perhaps. On the other hand, the opening story also introduced a mysterious and powerful yet harebrained bunch of occultist [*sic*] and hangers-on, a bizarre “sleeping sickness” that affected seemingly random people – in an ambitious tale that took these characters through several decades of strange and tumultuous changes.

Conventional stuff? Not at all. (“Introduction”)

Note that it was upon rereading the series that Berger formed this opinion.

B. Keith Murphy is also of the belief that there is more to the first seven issues than meets the eye. He writes, “It is in those first few issues of *The Sandman* that it becomes evident that Gaiman is not playing by the same rules as anyone else” (16). I would join Murphy, and build off of Berger, to argue that the beginning of *The Sandman* is not as conventional as it first appears. The issues that comprise *Preludes & Nocturnes*, while heavily influenced by DC, are in fact filled with those storytelling elements that had made issue 8 so popular with critics present, as well as the aspects characteristic of Gaiman that appear in these issues that I will identify and examine in the remaining space: intertextuality, characterization, mythopoesis, and metafiction.

In the first issue of *The Sandman*, Gaiman utilizes the intertextual universe of DC Comics, acknowledging his series’s relation to those that came before his – but in a different way that has been previously mentioned. Recall that the Kirby-Simon Sandman named himself, in part, after the crimefighter from the 1940s. Gaiman, too, makes reference to the first Sandman, Wesley Dodds, but instead of relating his own Sandman to Fox’s original, Gaiman explains Dodds’s character by reference to his own Sandman character, Dream. In issue 1, “Sleep of the

Just,” the Sandman is captured by Roderick Burgess in 1916 and held captive for seventy years. While he is incapacitated, the Dreaming – the Sandman’s realm and the place we visit each night while sleeping – is thrown into chaos. People are sleeping too long, others do not sleep at all, and nightmares begin to walk the waking world. So it happens that “The Universe knows someone is missing,” that someone being the King of Dreams, and to address the imbalance, “slowly it attempts to replace him” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 30). These words are written in a panel featuring Wesley Dodds. In a retroactive rewriting of the DC canon, Dodds becomes the Sandman of the 1940s in order to fill the void that appeared when the “real” Sandman, Gaiman’s Dream, was captured and rendered ineffective. “The idea came to [Dodds] in his sleep,” the next panels say; “He doesn’t dream about the man in the strange helmet anymore. No more burning eyes. Everything’s all right” (*Preludes* 30). The man Dodds has dreamt about is Dream, and in order to stop the dreams, Dodds becomes the Sandman. By explaining the existence of the Golden Age Sandman by Dream’s absence and thus establishing his character as the “original,” Gaiman simultaneously subverts the DC canon and foregrounds his own *Sandman* universe. Gaiman would also explain the remaining two other Sandmen, Sanford and Hall, in much the same manner, although he would wait to do so until issue 12.

Despite the Sandman’s importance to Gaiman’s re-imagined series, the character is an obscure one in the larger scope of the DC Universe. There are other, more recognizable and popular, DC characters featured in the issues of the first volume. On the whole, these characters are functional, acting as aides or adversaries for the protagonist to move the plot along. They appear in the questing arc to help or hinder Dream in recovering his lost tools. To recover his pouch of sand, Dream teams up with John Constantine in issue 3, “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” Constantine is from the *Hellblazer* comics, created for DC by, among others, Alan Moore. He

acts as a sidekick, aiding Dream in his quest to recover his lost item. He will make a brief reappearance in the final story arc, but mainly the character is used only this once. In issue 4, Dream journeys to Hell to recover his helm. He is greeted at the gates by Etrigan, a demon from Jack Kirby's 1970s title, *The Demon*. His appearance is only minor: he leads Dream to Lucifer. Issue 5, the first in the three-issue mini-arc, is the most heavily-influenced by the DC canon. "Passengers" opens in Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane, a setting familiar to readers of Batman comics and includes such popular and established DC characters as Doctor Destiny (John Dee), the Scarecrow (Dr. Jonathan Crane), Mr. Miracle (Scott Free), and Martian Manhunter (J'onn J'onzz). The Justice League of America is also mentioned in the issue. John Dee is set up as the antagonist over the next three issues, although Crane and Arkham Asylum make another brief appearance at the end of issue 7.

To recall Berger's question, is this acknowledgement and usage of the DC canon conventional? Perhaps. But there is more to the appearances of these characters than first meets the eye. Gaiman has expressed discomfort in using popular DC characters in the past. To offset this discomfort, the intertextual use of DC characters gives way to intertextual allusions and references to popular culture, literature, and history. In issue 3, John Constantine hears several popular songs relating to the Sandman: "Dream a Little Dream of Me," "Mister Sandman," and "Sweet Dreams (Of You)," "Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)," "Dream Lover," and "The Power of Love." Allusions to popular music occur often in Gaiman's work, and they sometimes appear in unexpected ways. In issue 4, for example, the Sandman visits Lucifer. The Lord of Hell, by Gaiman's request, was styled after David Bowie. Images from *The Wizard of Oz* and *Oedipus Rex* are associated with the DC characters from Arkham Asylum, and lines from two Shakespeare plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, are quoted in association with John Dee in issue

7, “Sound and Fury.” Dee also evokes an obscure historical figure in issue 5. Doctor Destiny describes himself as a “hermetic philosopher” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 148) and John Dee, an actual sixteenth-century figure, is described by these exact words. The use of a broader intertextuality alongside intertextual elements conventional to comics is characteristic of Gaiman’s broadening of convention in general. Gaiman also broadens and builds on preexisting DC characters, applying them to his narrative’s mythology.

Most critics of *Preludes & Nocturnes* have argued that the characters are not truly developed since the plot is largely based on the quest theme, on physical confrontations, battles, and alliances between characters who largely do not appear again in Gaiman’s narrative in any significant way. While these points are valid, there are important exceptions. In issues 1-7, Gaiman’s characters can be divided into two groups: DC-appropriated and original. There are some within these groups who will return again to the story and become fully realized characters only later on as part of his narrative, and some characters within these first issues are written as dynamic, rounded characters from the start.

Cain and Abel, first introduced in issue 2, “Imperfect Hosts,” began life in the DC Universe as story hosts for the 1970s horror anthologies, *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*. Briefly revived by Alan Moore in *Swamp Thing*, these characters were not fully developed and integrated into a narrative until Gaiman’s *Sandman*. From the outset, they are given fully-fledged personalities and narrative significance. Murphy identifies Gaiman’s ability to flesh out and integrate typically flat characters as “One of the most poignant changes” to the traditional modes of comics fantasy (16). Of Cain and Abel, he writes, “Gaiman takes the pair and, in the space of a few panels, makes the reader care about them and their continued plight” by connecting the two to the light/dark allegory, “one of the strongest mythic structures in the horror genre . . .

Gaiman utilizes it so deftly that instead of merely asking the audience to despise the evil Cain, Gaiman leaves the reader in a more literate, complicated space of pitying both Cain and Abel” (16). Murphy’s reading suggests, once again, Gaiman’s appeal to a more receptive audience. Even in the first issues of *Preludes & Nocturnes*, complex characters (who were once stock characters) are introduced and integrated into a highly complex plot structure.

Although Cain and Abel are merely introduced to readers as servants of the lord of the realm they inhabit, the characters will – along with the other story hosts introduced in issue 2, Lucien and The Three Witches – gain significance and develop as strong characters as the series goes on. The Three Witches is an interesting example because, while the two brothers and Lucien are part of the Sandman’s realm, the Three Witches is not. Instead of serving Dream, she acts instead as an antagonist, neither good nor evil, and serves an extremely significant role in the series’ overarching plot. In issue 2, the Three Witches is treated more like the mythological Hecate, conjured at a crossroads by the full moon with a black lamb and gallows. In later issues, she is also represented as the Fates, the Furies, and a force that is a power all its own. Adding to this mythological status, the Three Witches appears to careful readers in the guise of other characters in *Preludes & Nocturnes*. For example, the trio of Crane, Dee, and Dream at the end of issue 7 echoes both *The Wizard of Oz* and the Three Witches; and in issue 6, three women – young (maiden), middle-aged (mother), and elderly (crone) – appear together in multiple panels. This tendency to connect preexisting DC characters with mythological counterparts is characteristic of Gaiman’s overall storytelling.

Although critics point to the relationship between Dream and Death in “The Sound of Her Wings” as establishing the groundwork for Gaiman’s mythopoeic conception of the Endless in *The Sandman*, some groundwork is laid right from the start in the first issue. In issue 1,

readers learn that the character they believed to be the Sandman was, in actuality, Dream of the Endless. Roderick Burgess names others of the Endless, Destiny, Death, and Desire, and, later on in issue 4, Lucifer names Despair. Therefore, readers are aware of the existence of more than one being like Dream. It is generally assumed that Death is the first of the family to make an appearance; in fact, this is not the case. Destiny is seen in a single panel in issue 7 (Gaiman, *Preludes* 199). It should be mentioned, however, that Destiny is not an original character. Like The Sandman, Gaiman appropriates him from the DC Universe where, like other characters appropriated into Gaiman's mythopoeic universe, he was a story host of a 1970s DC horror title.

While the first seven issues of *The Sandman* do not go into much detail on the Endless, they do follow one of its members: Dream. Over the course of these issues, Gaiman fleshes out his protagonist, addressing such things as what powers Dream has and what responsibilities he has. In "Sleep of the Just," the Sandman is given three tools of power, a helm, a pouch of sand, and a ruby. The Sandman is a powerful force, powerful enough so that the universe must replace him and that his absence causes the sleeping sickness. He is able to manipulate people's dreams – as in shown in issue 1 when he uses the sand in the dream of a man guarding his prison cell to escape – and even to gather food and clothing from them. Dream, therefore, has full reign in dreams. The next issue develops Dream as the ruler of the dreamworld, the Prince of Stories. Issue 3 reveals one of his functions: to open doors, and issue 4 reveals more of his titles, this time "King of Dreams of the Nightmare Realms," "Kai'ckul," and "Lord L'Zori" (*Preludes* 110, 113, 146), all of which help to establish his identity as a mythopoeic figure. Both "A Hope in Hell" and "Passengers" show readers that the Lord of Dreams' appearance depends on who perceives him. Most important to the mythology of the Sandman is his realm, the Dreaming, first introduced in issue 2. Dream's realm is infinite, inhabited by servants. The House of Mystery

and the House of Secrets (taken from the DC titles of the same name) are part of the realm, as well as the Gates of Horn and Ivory (taken from classic mythology). The Dreaming is a reflection of Dream himself, and the different names by which he refers to it – The Dreamworld, the Dreamtime, and the Unconscious (*Preludes* 71) – relate to the different names attributed to the Sandman.

In addition to Gaiman's mythopoeic characters, his "normal" original characters are given special attention, as well. In the first seven issues of the series, Gaiman creates original characters that contain surprising depth and complexity considering their brief appearances. While they do not receive the same audience recognition and response as Death, they are similarly crafted, given distinct personalities, break the mold, and challenge audience expectation. Alex Burgess, for example, the son of the man who imprisons Dream, could easily be made a one-note villain. Like his father, he keeps Dream locked up in the basement of his home. Yet, through the depiction of Roderick's treatment of his son, as well as the inclusion of such human traits as remorse and love, Alex is humanized. He is not his father. It is significant that Alex Burgess, appearing in the first issue, "Sleep of the Just," is one of the first homosexual characters to be featured in mainstream comics; Gaiman, in fact, was one of the first mainstream comics authors to address issues of sexuality (Elder 74). Just as Death challenged perceptions of gender, Alex, like a significant number of other characters, challenges representations of human sexuality. Alex's punishment at the hands of Dream is horrific, but still, because of his fully drawn personality, readers are sympathetic to him.

This sympathy is carried over into "normal" characters like Rosemary from issue 5, "Passengers." A level of humanity in the characters allows readers to identify with them, and it is this identification that Gaiman plays to in order to shock the reader. Her relative normality is a

stark contrast to the superheroes and madmen in the issue. Her strength and intelligence allow her to talk back to Dee and, when she realizes he has a gun, threaten him with her husband who is, as she claims, employed by the mafia. She compassionately offers Dee food and clothing and, at the end of her ordeal, reveals that she lied about her husband's occupation. Readers are led to think that she will make it out alive, but instead, at the last moment, Dee casually shoots her. Gaiman uses his original character, Rosemary, to comment on Dee, showcasing the latter's lack of compassion and stability. This action foreshadows Dee's actions in the next issue.

Some of the characters in the first volume of stories, although seemingly small and unimportant, will appear again as major players in later story arcs. Chronozon, the demon Dream defeats for his helm in issue 4, will return in *Season of Mists* for revenge. Nada, a character featured in only a single page in "A Hope in Hell," is an important part of Dream's past; her story is told in issue 9 and she continues to affect Dream as the series goes on. In the first issue, Unity Kinkaid appears to be a one-off character, a child stricken with the mysterious sleeping sickness that has come from Dream's imprisonment; however, she returns to play a major role in the story arc of *The Doll's House* which directly follows *Preludes & Nocturnes*. Therefore, some of Gaiman's other original characters besides the Endless are important to future story arcs and will make more than one appearance in the series. In other words, they are treated with the same consideration as other, typically more important protagonists in comics fiction. This building of narratives on complex character development (and the unexpected) will come to characterize *The Sandman* as a comic. Despite stemming from the superhero comic tradition, it is not the superheroes or even the Endless as a group which take center stage in the series. It is the human characters or, in the case of beings like Cain and Abel, the humanized characters who are at the heart of the narrative.

The humanized characters of Cain and Abel also introduce another characteristic element of Gaiman's storytelling: the use of metafiction. Their presentation in issue 2 as story characters and story tellers, along with other various characters in *Preludes & Nocturnes*, thematize the connections between stories and dreams; Dream himself, of course, is the embodiment of such a connection. In a larger sense, the volume title is a commentary on itself, as Gaiman comments that the stories in the first volume are, "preludes to my figuring out my approach to the series" (Bender 35). It is in issue 6, "24 Hours," however, that Gaiman fully incorporates a metafictional theme. He says of the issue that it "was the first time I tried to break all the rules of what had been done in comics to date, to go as far as I could" (Bender 35) and that the issue was the first time "I realized on a gut level, not just an intellectual one, that I was writing a story about stories" (36).

An initial reading of "24 Hours" might not lead readers to place the story in the category of metafiction, since it is a continuation of the story arc begun in issue 5. The Sandman is out to collect his third and final missing tool. Deranged supervillain John Dee has escaped from Arkham Asylum and beaten the Sandman to the prize. They meet and do battle; Dee wins. At the end of issue 5, Dee enters an all-night diner and issue 6 goes on to recount what occurs in the diner over a twenty-four-hour period. Also overshadowing the metafictional aspect of the issue is the prevalence of violence and death, "24 Hours" is most remembered as what Gaiman calls "one of the very few genuinely horrific tales I have written" (*Preludes* 238). Dee uses the ruby dreamstone to control the patrons in the diner. He makes them act out different scenes, essentially playing with them as if they were dolls, and at the end of the day no one is left alive. He is entertained by having them kill themselves in imaginative ways. The issue was so violent that it scared readers away. Gaiman tells Bender, "A lot of readers said they stopped buying

Sandman after issue 6 and didn't come back for ages, until they were told it was safe" (35).

While horror is clearly present in the narrative, issue 6's employment of metafictional commentary – gone unnoticed by most critics – is a significant element in *Preludes & Nocturnes*, especially because its use will come to characterize Gaiman's storytelling in *The Sandman* as a whole.

"24 Hours" does not begin with horror, but with authorship. After all, the character who begins the narrative is not John Dee, but Bette Munroe. Bette is a waitress at the diner, but she defines herself as an author. Her inspiration stems from the patrons at the diner, as "They weren't just customers. They were raw material" (Gaiman, *Preludes* 163), and she feels good about writing their lives differently in order to make them happier. All of Bette's stories end happily. "That's because she knows when to stop," readers are told; "She's realized the real problem with stories – if you keep them going long enough, they always end in death" (Gaiman, *Preludes* 162). The statement can be read generally: Everything ends. It can also be read metafictionally. In relation to "24 Hours," the story does, in fact, end in death, the death of every one of the patrons at the hands of Dee. More generally, it can be applied to Gaiman's larger narrative in *The Sandman*. All three interpretations of Bette's statement are valid, yet, as Dowd reminds us, Gaiman's metafiction has a particular purpose: It examines stories, calling every aspect of them into question. Bette may most represent a metafictional commentary on authors and happy endings – a motif I identified in the previous chapter – but it is John Dee who most calls into question the second motif I identified there, authors and authorship.

Each hour, Dee has the patrons perform some new act. Dowd reads this as Gaiman setting the audience's authority above that of the author; Dee as the audience has the authority to change the "story" the patrons are enacting, and he does so often (Dowd 112). What I find more

important to the metafictional aspect of this story occurs at Hour 19. “Hour 19,” the yellow box reads at the top of the bottom right panel, “He lies to them” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 178).



Fig. 6. John Dee tells the diner patrons a story, from Neil Gaiman, “24 Hours,” *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1991; print; 178). Reproduced with permission. SANDMAN is TM & © DC Comics.

This is a perfect example of Gaiman’s narrative complexity. The sentence’s meaning depends on the reader reading the text against the illustration. As can be seen from the illustration above, the “lie” Dee tells to his audience is actually the tale of Snow White. As the story is implied to be a lie, by association, Dee is a liar. Interestingly, the panel is small for the page. It is easily passed over with a glance, but careful readers will note its introduction of the writer-as-liar motif mentioned in the last chapter.

Careful readers will also note that Dee is not the first character to bring up this issue; his Hour 19 is the most explicit incitement of the issue of writers as liars, but there is another character who first introduces the motif in the issue: Bette Munroe. Although subtly introduced, it cannot be passed over that Bette lies when she writes. She takes the lives of her source material and she changes them; for instance, she marries off lesbians Judy and Donna to nice men and

each lives happily ever after. The “characters” exist in reality – as Judy and Donna – but in Bette’s fiction, they are changed from their true state. Is this artistic license? Is Bette lying? Is she wrong to do so? By placing the issue in two characters – one traditionally good and one traditionally evil – Gaiman is not placing himself on either side of the argument. It would appear as if lying is somehow something that writers and/or storytellers end up doing. While readers are speculating on the fictional characters presenting such questions, they are, after all, reading the product of a writer who is, in a sense, lying. For this reason, perhaps the whole motif is taken up somewhat tongue-in-cheek by Gaiman, which accords with his playful approach to stories.

Gaiman is disposed to telling different kinds of stories different ways. “24 Hours” presents a deviation from the style established in *Preludes & Nocturnes* in being an extended thematization of storytelling itself – as Gaiman calls it, “an essay on stories and authors” (Gaiman, *Preludes* 239). The issue, along with the over seven that comprise the first collected volume, point the way towards the full realization of what Gaiman’s *Sandman* would be. Issue 8 does not appear from nowhere. There are seeds scattered throughout the earlier issues that will sprout, grow and bloom over the next 67.

Afterword: Gaiman and Visual Storytelling

In this examination of Gaiman's storytelling in *The Sandman*, I have largely ignored how Gaiman makes use of the visual aspect of the comics medium. While the following will certainly not be an exhaustive consideration of his visual storytelling, it is important to address his consideration thereof when discussing his comic book series. Comics are, after all, a "sight-based medium" (McCloud 202). Readers read both illustration and text, and both are represented visually on the page. While I have focused on the cerebral interpretation of the words on the page and the narrative implications thereof, I have previously mentioned only briefly the other side of the visual coin: the illustration of the text. The images are the visual storytelling that compliments the textual narration of the captions and speech bubbles, and they are also important as the text in Gaiman's storytelling in *The Sandman*.

I have discussed how Gaiman addresses a receptive audience in his writing. He also is receptive to his audience and maintains an open, friendly communication with his readers and fans through social media networks. He is privy to how his storytelling – both textual and visual – affects his readers. At the same time, he knows that the comics medium cannot collaborate as fully with its audience. He states that such a collaborative association between reader and author is nearly impossible in comics (Elder 57-8). "A comic," Gaiman tells Robert K. Elder, "is not a collaborative experience in the same way [as books] because I'm providing the reader with pictures, or somebody is providing the reader with pictures. Everybody knows what the Sandman looks like, an obvious example. In prose, there'd be a million Sandmans wandering about" (58). Visual fiction such as comics allows an author to manipulate the reader in ways that other forms of non-visual fiction cannot. For example, as Gaiman says, in comics, an author can "really go into someone's head and start mucking around behind the eyes" (Schweitzer 181). This

“mucking about” suggests a sort of playful control over the presentation of the story. Gaiman may be an authorial puppetmaster, but his intentions are to pull the strings in such a way as best present his story.

Despite allegations that comics authors and artists are separated by interpretive leagues – visuals being readily received, and text needing to first be perceived and decoded (McCloud 49) – Gaiman bridges the gap. In one way, he allows for his text to become, in part, received information. I had mentioned the lettering done by Todd Klein in relation to the sparse pair of panels in “24 Hours.” Todd Klein uses a distinct font for each character. This is one of the reasons why readers are able to tell that the character who speaks in the panel in “24 Hours” is John Dee. By using a particular font for a particular character, the dialogue and speech bubbles become readily received codes for characters. The Sandman, Lord Morpheus will have a black speech bubble with white text, Delirium will have a multi-colored speech bubble with inconsistently-shaped and -sized lettering, and so forth. In total, Klein created over thirty styles unique to a character (Bender 245). Gaiman’s consideration of these details is indicative of his consideration of both the textual and visual aspects of comics storytelling. His consideration of these details can be further seen in *The Sandman*’s scripts.

The guide for making an issue of *The Sandman*, Gaiman’s script, is the second-most detailed (and longest) script in the business. Gaiman includes details both of a textual nature (dialogue and captions for the letterer to write) and a visual one for the artists. There is more than one artist with whom Gaiman works. In addition to an illustrator, Gaiman also collaborates with letterers, inkers, and pencillers. “When I’m writing a script,” Gaiman comments, “I’m writing a letter to an artist, telling him what I want, what I’m trying to do, what I want in each panel, what effect we’re trying to do” (Schweitzer 181). At the same time Gaiman controls his presentation

with highly detailed scripts, he gives his artists license to adapt his scripts to best fit their work. This further bridges the gap between author and artist, inviting an open partnership in the production of the comic. In the opening note to Kelly Jones in the script for issue 17, “Calliope,” Gaiman considers his script “a guide” and encourages Jones to draw as he sees fit (*Dream Country*). Gaiman will often write stories around what the artist for the issue or story arc is capable of, and what he or she would like to do. *Endless Nights*, for example, was done in part to give him the chance to work with artists he had never had during the series’ original run. The level of detail in his scripts shows that he thinks of all aspects of his storytelling, not just the words that will go on the page. His scripts include not only dialogue, but go in-depth as to the appearance of characters, objects and surroundings. Below, I have reproduced two pages of a working script of issue 17 of *The Sandman*:

Episode 17

HI KELLEY,

WELCOME TO THE WEIRD WORLD OF SANDMAN. WHAT WE'RE DOING IS A SERIES OF SHORT STORIES FOR FOUR OR FIVE ISSUES HERE; I'VE FINISHED THE DOLL'S HOUSE STORYLINE, AND THERE WAS A WHILE TOWARD THE END OF THE STORYLINE WHEN I JUST COULDN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE -- PARTLY BECAUSE I'D KEEP GETTING NEW IDEAS FOR STORIES AND BE UNABLE TO GET THEM IN, AND ALSO BECAUSE I WANTED TO DO A FEW TOTALLY SELF-CONTAINED STORIES THAT I COULD GET OVER WITH IN 24 PAGES: THE WORRY THAT I DIDN'T HAVE A CLUE HOW DOLL'S HOUSE WAS GOING TO END (WHICH I DIDN'T, UNTIL I GOT THROUGH SANDMAN 15) WAS GETTING PRETTY NERVE-WRACKING...

THIS IS THE FIRST OF THEM. I'M CALLING THE SHORT STORIES "DREAM COUNTRY." INCIDENTALLY, KELLEY, I WRITE PRETTY FULL SCRIPT, FOR THE MOST PART. HAVING SAID THAT, IT'S A GUIDE: IF YOU SEE A WAY TO IMPROVE IT, MAKE IT WORK BETTER, THEN GO FOR IT. YOU'RE THE ARTIST, AFTER ALL.

OK -- LET'S GO.

THEY SAY THAT ON AMERICAN COP SHOWS A LOT.

.....

ODD FACTS AND COINCIDENCES DEPT: SO FAR THE SANDMANS I'VE STARTED AND THEN HAD TO RESTART, BECAUSE THEY WERE HEADING OFF IN THE WRONG DIRECTION WERE: 2,7,12 AND NOW THIS ONE, 17. EVERY FIVE ISSUES...

.....

OKAY KELLEY -- THE BAD NEWS. THE REASON WHY THIS IS PROBABLY GOING TO BE SLIGHTLY LATE IS ALSO THE REASON THAT IT BEARS NO RESEMBLANCE TO THE STORY I TOLD YOU ON THE PHONE. THIS IS BECAUSE I STARTED THE ONE I TOLD YOU ABOUT, SEX AND VIOLETS, TWICE, GOT SEVEN PAGES INTO ONE VERSION AND TEN PAGES, THE SECOND TIME, ON A TOTALLY DIFFERENT TREATMENT, AND EACH TIME IT DIED ON THE PAGE. WHICH MEANT THAT I BASICALLY HAD TO DECIDE WHETHER TO TRY AGAIN, OR TO STRIP THE STORY DOWN AS FAR AS I COULD, TAKE WHAT I COULD, AND START AGAIN. I SUSPECT AT SOME POINT I'LL COME BACK TO OLD PUCK, BUT IN THE MEANTIME WE'VE GOT A DIFFERENT STORY ABOUT A DIFFERENT MUSE, AND ABOUT THE TWO MEN WHO HAVE HELD HER IN THRALL, AND ABOUT THE SANDMAN, AND HIS REVENGE ON THEM. IT'S A DARKER STORY THAN THE OTHER, CREEPIER AND LESS COMFORTING.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT I'M 99% SURE IT'LL WORK THIS TIME, AND I HOPE YOU ENJOY DRAWING IT AS MUCH YOU WOULD HAVE THE OTHER.

.....

EDITORS NOTE: The script comments that appear on the following pages, in red and blue ink, are by Neil Gaiman and Kelley Jones, respectively.

Fig. 7. Reproduced scans of script for "Calliope," from Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Dream Country*. (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1995; print; n.pag.). Reproduced with permission. © DC Comics.

Calliope.

Page 1 panel 1

WE ARE LOOKING AT THE FACE OF RICK MADOC. NO PANEL BORDER -- HE'S IN CLOSE UP, FULL FACE, LOOKING AT SOMETHING BELOW HIM WITH AN EXPRESSION OF INTERESTED DISTASTE. HE'S THIN, MID-THIRTIES, RED SHORT-CUT HAIR. NOT A CLASSICAL COMIC BOOK FACE -- HE'S GOOD-LOOKING IN A JOHN LENNONISH SORT OF WAY.

Caption - top right: May 1986.

Madoc:I don't have any idea.

Madoc:So what is it? It smells quite disgusting.

Page 1 panel 2

PULL BACK. WE'RE IN A ROOM IN MADOC'S HOUSE: HIS STUDY, BOOKSHELVES ON THE WALLS, A DESK WITH A WORD PROCESSOR ON IT. A SET OF ENCYCLOPEDIAS. FAIRLY MODERN. MAYBE SOME PAINTINGS ON THE WALL. LITTLE STATUES HERE AND THERE. THERE'S A SLIM TELEPHONE ON A TABLE IN ONE CORNER, AND, IN THE OPPOSITE CORNER OF THE ROOM, A DOOR TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE. BUT THAT'S ALL BACKGROUND, AND WE DON'T NEED TO PUSH IT HERE. DROP IT IN AS WE MOVE AROUND THE ROOM, LOOKING AT THESE PEOPLE. WE'RE LOOKING AT MADOC, WHO IS WEARING A BROWN LEATHER JACKET, TEE SHIRT AND JEANS, AND A YOUNGER MAN, IN GLASSES, A DOCTOR (ALTHOUGH NOT WEARING A WHITE COAT) FELIX GARRISON. DR GARRISON IS HOLDING SOMETHING OUT -- IT'S BLACK, LIKE A LARGE, HAIRY STONE, OR A FOSSILISED TRIBBLE COVERED IN SLIME. IT'S A TRICHINOBEZOAR -- YOU MAY BE ABLE TO FIND A REFERENCE PICTURE OF SOME KIND IN A MEDICAL DICTIONARY. THE DR LOOKS RATHER PLEASED WITH HIMSELF. IT'S EARLY EVENING IN EARLY SUMMER OR LATE SPRING.

Garrison:It's what you were asking for. It's a bezoar.

Madoc:Hang on, I thought they were like, precious stones?

Page 1 panel 3

WE'RE LOOKING AT THE GUNKY, HORRIBLE, CALCIFIED MASS, HELD IN THE DOCTOR'S HAND, IN CLOSE UP. IT LOOKS REVOLTING. MAKE IT LOOK HAIRY AND SLIMY AT THE SAME TIME: IMAGINE A CAT-SICKED-UP HAIRBALL TO THE MAX...

DR:Most of them are.

This is a trichinobezoar -- it's made of hair. I cut it out of a young woman's stomach this afternoon. Lovely long hair she had. Trouble was, she'd been sucking it, chewing it, -- swallowing the hairs. Must've been doing it for years.

Guy Lawley M.D. found me a photo of a trichobezoar afterwards. It looked a lot like what Kelley had drawn. Guy is the only doctor I know who also writes comics from time to time, and he treats my stranger medical requests, for things like cancer or heart diseases, with more respect than they deserve.

Fig. 8. Reproduced scans of script for "Calliope," from Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Dream Country* (New York: Vertigo-DC Comics, 1995; print; n.pag.). Reproduced with permission. © DC Comics.

Gaiman's language in these scripts remains casual, making jokes about American cop shows and going into detail about the trichinobezoar, but this should not indicate that he does not take his storytelling seriously. While his language is playful – as his overall approach is playful – he is still concerned with the presentation of the story he wants to tell. Gaiman is a storyteller and, as McCloud points out, storytellers in comics “have something to say through comics and devote all their energies to controlling their medium, refining its ability to convey messages effectively” (180). While Gaiman offers some slack to his team of artists, he is the puppetmaster behind the scenes. These scripts, and his hands-on approach, are examples of the control he exerts over his medium.

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