Controlling *The Sandman*: The Function of the Grotesque in the Ninth Art

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Chapter One

A New Art Is Born

During the end of the 1930s, comic books were published frequently because they were cheap, interesting to the public, and easy to carry – which became important when most of the young American males were drafted into World War II. Although many genres were present in these comic books, superheroes were immediately popular, with Superman's introduction to the world by two teenage boys named Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel. Perhaps because these early creators were teenagers, comic books targeted that age group and were read overwhelmingly by teenage boys. As a result, comic book publishing wanted something flashy and intriguing to this demographic. The culture created around American comics[1] was one of an assembly line – with little focus on the art of comics and more concern about churning out as many stories as possible to make as much money as possible.

Then, Fredric Wertham published *The Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, which lambasted comic books for the poor influence they had on those reading them, blaming them for everything from creating more violence in the young to lowering the literacy rate in adolescents. As a result, comic book writers and publishers decided to edit themselves to ward off government involvement in censorship. They felt that this censorship was imminent because of the growing discontent among parents about the power the comic books had on their children,

[1] "Comics" has been the chosen term for this project not only because it best fits the overall medium, but also because it best suit *Sandman*. Other terms frequently used in academic or popular discussion of the field – graphic novel, comix, or sequential art – are unsatisfying in some way either because they ill-define *Sandman* – best seen in graphic novel and sequential art – or are simply not applicable to it – as seen in the case of comix, which has mainly been used in the underground world, although its distinction from comic and formation is helpful as seen in Art Spiegleman's commentary on it: "But I spell it *c-o-m-i-x* so you are not confused by the fact that comics have to be funny, as in comic. You think it is a co-mix of words and picture" (Bongco 94). Douglas Wolk's explanation provides further justification for preferring this term: "In general, I tend to use 'comics,' because it's the word that people who actually make them use among themselves. The industry calls thin, saddle-stitched pamphlets 'comic books' … virtually any squarebound volume of comics sold on bookstore shelves a 'graphic novel,' and the form in the abstract 'comics.' That's how I generally use those terms, too. Consider, by analogy, the difference between 'movies,' 'films,' and 'cinema'" (61).

which seemed backed up by professional opinions such as Dr. Wertham's. Thus, they introduced the Comics Code Authority, which severely limited comics by not allowing drug references, too much violence, and the bad to ever win, among other things. However, as the mainstream comic books continued to publish under these strict directions, an underground world was built that completely disregarded the code: "The countercultural comix movement – scurrilous, wild and liberating, innovative, radical, and yet in some ways narrowly circumscribed – gave rise to the idea of comics as an acutely personal means of artistic exploration and self-expression" (Hatfield ix). The underground world showed much of what comics could be capable of. They departed from the more formulaic nature of comic books as well as the censoring that was going on. One of the best examples of this departure is Robert Crumb's work. He always went against the mainstream and was instrumental in setting up the underground comic world. Thus, comics continued to flourish, even as mainstream publications experienced censorship. Even though the mainstream comics were censored, they still were popular and published a large amount of work. DC Comics and Marvel Comics have been the leading mainstream comic publishers, and have tended to perpetually create formulaic stories targeted toward teenage boys.

However, most notably in the eighties, mainstream comics began to take themselves seriously, as the underground comics had been doing for decades. Instead of merely staying with the formulas that comic writers had relied on during the Golden and Silver Age of Comic Books[2], the writers began to create more gripping stories that were more mature, better written, and much more thought provoking. For example, such groundbreaking publications as Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* (January 1984 to September 1987) and *Watchmen* (1986 to 1987), Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989 to 1996), and

[2] The Golden Age of Comic Books refers to the time when comic books were first being published, around the late 1930s until the early 1950s, while the Silver Age of Comic Books is from around the time 1956 to 1970, especially notable for the stories created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

Art Spiegleman's *Maus* (1986 and 1991) – which further aided the critical reception of comic books when it won the Pulitzer Prize have come out. These comics, and many that came after them, showed that comic books were not simply for teenage boys and that this medium could be both exceptional, in terms of artistry and story, and mature, meaning that the stories in comics did not have to be for adolescents or the simple minded. The literariness of comics was now revealed to the American culture at large, and since the eighties and early nineties more comics have been published for critical acclaim and respect. They no longer languish under tired stereotypes and have begun to be taken seriously, although many still are slow to believe in the validity of comics as something worthy of academic study and recognition.

At the same time, the fact that comics have not consistently received the respect due them has freed them in some ways. In the past, they may not have gotten the respect they deserved, but, as Roger Sabin pointed out, this lack of respect and apprehension at terming comics "art" has led them to be unencumbered by the stipulations art has fooled itself are needed (9). This idea was lived out the most vivaciously by the underground comix that aggressively pursued their own agenda. By the eighties, comix were being read by comic book writers, which is partly why they were able to free themselves from the constraints that had been placed on comics because of the assumed adolescent readership. Once this stipulation was overturned, comics were able to flourish with their free form and new ideas. The fact that some still do not look at comics as art means that comics creators are able to ignore the worn out aspects that have hindered the world of art in the past, especially as the fine art world has spent so much of its time in the recent past questioning and pontificating on whether or not art is even needed. The comics' world at large has been able to sidestep this issue since their focus is not on one image or display. Rather, they are freed to focus on storytelling or other elements that the world of literature holds as its

own. As a result, comics offers more freedom than most other mediums because they include aspects of many different forms instead of being limited by the assumptions of the higher critic.

Comics, as they connect images with words, are an immensely important aspect of the contemporary American culture, a culture that appears to be dominated by visuals. The bringing together of what used to dominate the culture, words, and what dominates it now, visuals, makes comics a commentary on the time, especially as many still see the present society as postmodern. As Jason Mittell mentions in his article "Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *The Simpsons*," postmodernity is often concerned with the mixing of genres, which is precisely what comics are as they blend visual art with written text (15-17). Furthermore, most comics deal with themes that are important to a postmodern world such as fragmentation and questionable narrators. Indeed, comics have grown in popularity to such an extent that most bookstores now have a "graphic novel" section, and the importation from Japan of manga – the Japanese version of comics, different only in approach, style, and technique and not art form – has proved a most lucrative business. With the acceptance of comics into the mainstream public's conscious, scholars began to look a little more closely into what had captured the public's imagination.

Even so, the acceptance of comics by academia has been slow and cautious, but in the past decade, because of the newly recognized literariness of comics, several universities have created courses, concentrations, and journals specifically for the study of comic books, as seen in the University of Florida's relatively new journal *ImageTexT*. Although some universities are accepting comics as a valid medium in the art world, just as many are not. However, the world of English is turning increasingly towards cultural studies, which defines the object of study more inclusively by reaching from low as well as high culture and from other mediums, especially the

visual, rather than simply the traditional novel and poem, so anticipating this transformation is essential for someone who wishes to enjoy a career in the English collegiate world. Having an informed understanding of comics is essential for all English students because this medium has a great deal of power within the culture where they are working and are overtly influencing the world of literature, as seen in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon which details the life of two people working in the comics industry during the Golden Age. The foundation of an English student is built on a desire to understand better the world around him or her, and comics provide another level of understanding that will be ignored only at one's peril, especially as today's world is moving away from textual, rational arguments into more of a visual, implicit way of thinking, which is evident in the decline of print and the rise of electronic media.

However, this beginning does not mean that comics do not deserve to be studied in an academic setting or that they lack the need for interpretation and better understanding. Thus, this project will address a certain way in which to approach comics that should prove helpful for the further appreciation of this medium and for filling in a gaping hole in today's scholarship. In the English speaking world, few comic theory books exist with as much importance as Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (first published in 1985) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) because of the way both of these works looked at comics as a serious art form. Both of these books define comics in a unique way. Eisner opted for the term "sequential art" (2), while McCloud went a little further: "com.ics (kom'iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb**.** 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (20). Eisner's definition is a little too broad to be quite useful; however, McCloud's, while more limiting than Eisner's, is intentionally

open-ended, which makes it useful to some degree. McCloud spent a little more time honing a specific definition, which may set his definition up to become dated quickly. He wanted to open up the floor for discussion of the term and did not believe that a clear-cut definition exists. Although there have been, especially recently, many books written about definitions of comics in the English speaking world, these are the two that have had the most influence to date.

As helpful as these two works are, they do leave open and in need of discussion much that deals with comics, and, though many more books on comic theory have been published in this past decade, most of the ground comics cover has been left untouched. Both of these texts deal with comic theory and practicality from the perspective of artist/author of comics, which means they leave out a huge part of how the comics medium has been written in the past. This fact is important because it colors the way they handle comics as a form. Even so, both of these books are a good place to start when attempting to understand comics, comic theory, and the different approaches to comics that can exist. As they are a place to start, they are certainly not a place to end. Other works like Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics* (2007) and Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics* (2005) have fleshed out comic theory in America a little fuller; however, there is still much to understand and uncover. One aspect of comics that is not only pervasive, being present in almost every comic published even while they were subdued under the harsh code – but also of paramount importance in conveying nonfiction and in understanding comics' reception, is the nature of the grotesque in comics and how it controls or impacts the story being told. This aspect of comics has only ever been touched on briefly by comic theorists and begs to be better understood. Thus, this project will show the power, prominence, and significance of the grotesque in comics as an essential component of properly interpreting comics as seen in Neil Gaiman's epic tragedy *Sandman*.

Dissecting the grotesque in comics also calls for an investigation into how the history of comics production and in which context they reside affects the final result of the story produced. An element that is difficult when approaching comics is not only the preconceived notions that people bring to comics, but also the literary albatross that hangs about comics in that people make false assumptions about how to read comics, when, typically, a great deal more goes into it than they expect. Thus, understanding the role of the reader and the methodology involved in processing comics, especially the difference between processing them and processing prose, has also been the focus of many comic theorists. Unfortunately, most people who approach comics look through the lens that have been tailored for literary texts, not visual-literary texts, which is precisely what comics are. Terrence Hawks pontificates on this problem as well:

> How can we recognize or deal with the new? Any equipment we bring to the task will have been designed to engage with the old: it will look for and identify extensions and developments of what we already know. To some degree, the unprecedented will always be unthinkable. But the question of what "texts" are or may be has also become more and more complex, has forced us to revise our sense of the sort of material to which the process of "reading" may apply. (qtd. in Bongco 45)

Indeed, most people would say that they "read" comics, and the term is even often applied to paintings or other solely visual elements. At the same time, just because something can be "read" does not mean that it should be viewed exclusively in terms of what reading implies, especially because with comics the visual element is just as real, if not more dominating, than the prose. Of course, comic theory is not completely opposed to literary theory: "The study of comics has a goal similar to the study of art and literature in general: to promote an understanding of the

medium that sharpens perception and awareness, leading ultimately to a keener enjoyment of the form" (Bongco 45). Ultimately, what is key in understanding before attempting to look at any specific comic is that the visual aspect of the comic should not, and really cannot, be separated from the text of that comic.

The reading that takes place when someone is looking at a comic focuses on a greater aspect of comics and how the medium works, especially in respect to comics' literariness[3]. Just as "[w]riters can never be sure that their words have only one possible interpretation" (Stevens qtd. in Godawa 197), comics present the same complexity, if on a deeper level. However, the reading of comics has often been castigated, most powerfully in Wertham's book when he discusses how it makes children illiterate: "they have become what I call 'picture readers.' Later I learned that not only children with reading difficulties, but also those with good reading ability, are seduced by comic books into 'picture reading'" (139), but the proof of these points has not been adequately shown. In fact, it simply seems that comics encourage a different kind of reading, as argued by Tom Wolf:

> For the last hundred years, the subject of reading has been connected quite directly to the concept of literacy . . . learning to read . . . has meant learning to read words . . . But . . . reading has gradually come under closer scrutiny. Recent research has shown that the reading of words is but a subset of a much more general human activity, which includes symbol decoding, information integration and organization . . . Indeed, reading – in the most general sense – can be thought

[3] This literariness, which best connects to those comics born in the underground or the mainstream comics of the 1980s, refers to when the comic is related to literature in the context of what makes literature literature. The term here means the elements in the comic that connect to literature, that are typical of literature, and those that are involved with making literature what it is.

> of as a form of perceptual activity; but there are many others – the reading of pictures [for example]. (qtd. in Eisner 1-2)

This reading is just as important to the human race as literary reading because, especially in today's culture, images bombard the mind each day in every moment. Thus, the picture should not be ignored in favor of the written dialogue or narration, just as the prose portion of the comic must be read. In light of this aspect, focusing on mainly the visual for this study is necessary. Charles Hatfield mentions that "[c]omics demand a different order of literacy: they are never transparent, but beckon their readers in specific, often complex ways, by generating tension among their formal elements" (67). This different kind of reading is much more developed than most people assume when they see someone reading a comic. Just as Wertham said, most people think that simple "picture reading" is occurring. However, "much more [is] going on than mere 'picture reading': comic art is characterized by plurality, instability, and tension, so much so that no single formula for interpreting the page can reliably unlock *every* comic. Far from being too simple to warrant analysis, comic art is complex enough to frustrate any attempt at an airtight analytical scheme" (Hatfield 66). In fact, reading comics is a much more complicated process than reading straight prose if for no other reason than that no definite answer can ever be reached by the very nature of an image, which creates a diversity of meaning rather than concreteness, which is found in straight writing.

Understanding how a reader "reads" comics is what makes up most of comic theory. This question seems to be the most interesting to the majority of critics, especially when viewed through the correct lens. The understanding of how a person takes in a picture or painting has long been a source of interest for scholars; so much of what the ancient tradition about pictures has discovered can be applied to this new medium. For example, Horace notes the "similarity of

poetry to pictures" (LaGrandeur 119). With this idea in mind, the reading of comics is elevated in a certain sense. The challenge that is usually linked to poetry can be transferred to comics because the text of a comic is often quite akin to that of a poem. Words are never wasted because there is simply not room to do so. As a result, each word is vitally important to the overall story, just as each image is. Even though Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics*, postulated that they do not require words to be comics (8), Robert C. Harvey begs to differ when he defines the "essential characteristic of 'comics' – the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives" as "the incorporation of verbal content" (25). Whether McCloud or Harvey is correct remains to be seen, but the importance of words within comics should not be disregarded. Another aspect that adds heady weight to comics is the fact that this complexity and "flexibility in the manipulation of meaning" is "often in a context that is constrained within a small space" (McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon 3). The small space creates an intensity of meaning within the space that is used, which is why comics can easily be linked to poetry. Thus, much of the power that comics holds is in the intensity created between the text and the reader.

This intensity is achieved in many different ways in comics because the writing process includes several separate steps and can be quite different depending on the writer/artist. Most mainstream comics have not been written and drawn by the same person. Instead, there has typically been a writer, a penciler, a colorist, and an inker. The difference between the two approaches also colors the way in which the comic should be read because a comic produced by only one person is most likely much clearer in its thematic elements compared to one created, and altered, by numerous of people, all with their own specific ideas and desires. These different aspects bring together many perspectives, sometimes making it hard to have a clear purpose. However, most view comics in the context of auteur theory, where one person, typically the

writer, is responsible for the created work, as seen in Gaiman's control and use of the artists when creating *Sandman*. While there may be some problems with accepting this view completely, it does prove helpful when discussing or reviewing certain comics, as seen in Alan Moore's oeuvre. Jason Lutes, whose *Berlin* has captured critical imagination, says that "cartooning is picture-writing" (qtd. in Eisner 136). This description of writing comics might appear an oversimplification, but Lutes is attempting to bring together the word and image aspect of comics. The term "cartooning," which is often used to describe what comic writers/artists do, does not give a clear picture of what makes up comics, while "picture-writing" includes both important aspects of them: words and images.

The connection between words and images within comics is also a point with which most comic scholars concern themselves. Kevin LaGrandeur goes on to describe Gorgias' beliefs about the connection and difference between words and images: "Hence, he reasons, we must conclude that images and words are effectively equal; they are both able to 'ravish' the soul, to cause blindness to reason and law. As he says, the emotion that is created by images is 'engraved upon the mind' and 'is exactly analogous to what is spoken'" (121). The emotion that can be achieved by an image inside of the reader is a power that cannot be ignored. The images within a comic are what the reader first sees: "Thus, Gorgias, ultimately equates the persuasive power of the image to that of words" (LaGrandeur 121). Indeed, the connection between words and images is what makes up the beauty and power of comics, and the comic grotesque specifically captures and embodies this beauty and power. It is a medium that is able to draw on both the element's strengths while side-stepping their weakness, if handled correctly. This element helps to further connect the two as they are combined so importantly in comics. Though this connection is true, for the present study, focusing mainly on just the visual aspect of the

grotesque in comics is in order so that the reading of comics and the power of the grotesque might be better understood.

Unfortunately, the studies that have been done on comics have been limited to ways to read comics or attempts to justify comics to the academic world. However, this leaves much of the richness in comics illuminated. One of the major aspects of comics that should be better researched is the very real and important role of the grotesque in comics. This aspect in comics has been all but neglected, but it is vital in the development and understanding of a story. Furthermore, one of the most important comics that has been published is *Sandman*. Out of the five comics previously mentioned that helped the mainstream comics rise out of juvenility to a higher literacy, *Sandman* is one of the most ignored texts by the academic community. It deserves to be viewed under better scrutiny. Because of this reason, *Sandman* merits a viewing in the context of the grotesque and understanding how the elements of the grotesque direct and lead the story to its conclusion.

Thus, comics have become a vital part of the American culture, both mainstream and subversive. Interestingly, some believe that the time of freedom and expansion in the comic world has dissipated. They report that teenagers are spending their money on other things and that comic books have already seen their best times (Raphael and Spurgeon 270-1). However, they are merely focusing on one aspect that is part of the entire world of comics: the comic book as it has been known for the past fifty years, not as it is coming to be known. Perhaps the time of serialized comics is waning to an end, but the moment for comics to shine brightly and receive as much notice as they deserve is only just beginning, especially since comics are the only growing print industry in America today.

Chapter Two

The Grotesque in Comics: Ugly Is the New Pretty

In 1831 Victor Hugo spun his magic prose once again with the haunting, gripping story of the hunchback that was often rumored to live among the bells in Notre Dame. His story of a grotesquely shaped man learning to see his own true humanity enticed and intrigued readers, but as the story unfolded the readers were allowed to be swept away into the character of the hunchback, easily forgetting his maimed shape, upsetting the balance of the grotesque between horrifying and sympathetic. However, if Hugo had written *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* as a comic, the character's grotesque aspect would never be able to be so easily forgotten. Indeed, the images and elements of the grotesque boast significant power in comics because of their overtly visual nature, which gives this literary technique more control, and therefore importance, than seen in prose writing.

Thus, it is vital to look at the grotesque in comics in general and *Sandman* in particular. The grotesque in *Sandman* accomplishes something quite unique as the story unfolds. At the beginning of *Sandman,* the grotesque acts vigorously and vivaciously. It is overt in its power, controlling the reader in a very aggressive way because of its heavy handed use. However, in the later part of *Sandman,* the grotesque becomes more sophisticated and subtle. The power it exerts is still present and palpable, but the way Gaiman accomplishes the transition shows the potency of the grotesque and evidences its contribution to the comics' literariness. Throughout the entire series the grotesque is pervasive, which is why it needs to be study. Such a study has yet to be performed, even about other comics, which are also rife with grotesque elements. The grotesque's power in comics is assertive and unique as a literary tool, and *Sandman* provides

almost a handbook of the uses of the comic grotesque[4] as it provides examples of almost every possible grotesque use and development throughout the entire series. Thus, the grotesque needs to be studied in the context of comics, especially *Sandman,* which reveals the depth, breadth and varied uses of the comic grotesque.

However, before looking at the grotesque specifically in comics, understanding the definition of the grotesque is vital. Over the years, the grotesque has collected many different definitions. The term grotesque is typically believed to have been devised as a descriptive word for certain ornate murals (Clayborough 1). Although the grotesque has been present in art throughout each century, in the late fifteenth century, the word was first created to describe an ornamental style in the design of a building, which later became manifested most effectively through the architecture of churches as seen in the gargoyles and other features of decoration (Kayser 19-26). Nevertheless, the definition of the grotesque has expanded and developed since the fifteenth century beyond the mere ornamentation of buildings, leading to a wider definition. Wolfgang Kayser works towards a definition in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* and comes up with a loose classification, including any form of the monstrous and any human with exaggerated, intensified, or distorted features (181-83). This loose definition helps begin the understanding of what the grotesque is. John Ruskin, the noted English art critic of the eighteen hundreds, discusses the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice*:

> [T]he grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque and terrible grotesque; but that we cannot legitimately consider it under these two aspects because there are hardly

[4] The comic grotesque is the term that I will use to pertain to the grotesque as it is uniquely used in the comic form. It is not to indicate that there is always something inherently funny in its use, though there often is, but the comic grotesque is distinct in many ways from the grotesque found in other forms, which should be explored.

> any examples which do not in some degree combine both elements; there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest. (126-7)

The point Ruskin is making is vital because it reveals a key aspect to the grotesque. However terrifying seeing a man with the body of a lion might be, there is also something intriguing about it that makes the image benign in some ways. Indeed, the grotesque is always both repulsive and attractive, which is why *Sandman* both shows the comic grotesque at its best and reveals its ability to communicate important universal truths to today's audience.

The many definitions for the grotesque build upon one another instead of detracting, but the main theme that can be seen in almost all of them is the paradoxical nature of the grotesque that both pulls one in while simultaneously pushing one away. Dieter Meindl argues that "while the grotesque is usually conceived as subverting the natural order of things [Meindl] . . . will stress that it can also serve to evoke the nonrational dimension of life as such, a dimension that, in principle, is both alluring and sinister, benign and devouring, and that defines itself against ideas of pattern and order" (15). The paradoxes of the grotesque are never, and can never be, ignored because they are what make up the most important aspect of the grotesque. Meindl goes on to say that "the grotesque is essentially the sphere of the unfathomable, a familiar world in the process of dissolution or estrangement, diffusing an aura that instills insecurity, revulsion, and terror and cause the disintegration of our sense of soundness, symmetry, and proportion" (15); in the same way, Kayser says, "The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence" (37). Gaiman in *Sandman* uses this aspect of the grotesque to reveal a

deeper truth as he seeks to bring together any and every mythology the world over. This aspect of the grotesque should not be minimized because the grotesque's power is in the fact that it both reflects man and what is wholly other. Meindl reports Gerhard Hoffman's "judicious contemporary" definition of the grotesque:

> [T]he grotesque denotes a condition of disorder; it contains "two pairs of contradictions that, again, form an opposition and yet are linked to one another in a peculiar manner [rather like the way words and images work within comics]. The first (logical) contradiction – 'rational' men are irrational – gives rise to the ridiculous; the second (ethical) contradiction – men are inhuman – gives rise to the ghastly and horrifying." (15)

Together these two aspects of the grotesque work to betray everything that man assumes he knows, which is why the grotesque is so disturbing while also being so intriguing.

Authors of all sorts, including comic writers, chose to use the elements of the grotesque because of different aspects of the story they are attempting to bring out that can best be achieved through the grotesque. Bernard McElroy mentions that "[t]he source of the grotesque in art and literature is man's capacity for finding a unique and powerful fascination in the monstrous" (1). Indeed, man has always been fascinated with the monstrous, which is why the grotesque remains prevalent. McElroy goes on to contend that for something to be grotesque there must be an element of animalism or physicality present, not simple metaphors (29). McElroy's capitalization on the fact that the grotesque cannot be merely metaphorical is important, especially as it relates to comics because mere metaphor would not be shown in the visual image, which is what gives the grotesque its power in comics. Ronald E. Morgan looks into the grotesque and applies it to the author of the piece by noting that as a writer creates his

work the grotesque reveals the inner workings of his mind (15). This assessment seems to suggest that the author might not be in total control of the grotesque elements that seep into his work: "Their view explains how an author's attempt to overcome his own fears or drives can be transformed into imagery that helps him control not only his own feelings, but also his audience's response to what may have been heretofore unmanageable" (Morgan 18). From this perspective, the dangers of the grotesque are revealed in terms of storytelling, especially in the context of comics because the grotesque so overtly controls the direction of the story, which calls the author to the need to be in complete control of the story he is weaving. Some authors chose to use the grotesque in order to create a certain tone or freedom for themselves. Indeed, some blatantly use the grotesque to separate themselves from others in a kind of rebellion: "The idea of grotesque art as a kind of rebellion against systematic thought suggests an emotional attitude on the part of the creator which in contrast to Kayser's view, expressed earlier, that 'the unity of the perspective in grotesque art lay in the cold view (*in dem kalten Blick*) of worldly affairs as an empty, senseless puppet-play, a grotesque marionette-theatre'" (Clayborough 68). A great example of someone who approaches the grotesque in this manner is Art Spiegleman. He wanted to be seen as an artist, not tied to the pretty art of the mainstream comic writers of the seventies. Indeed, most comic writers in the underground movement sought to separate their work from the mainstream by making it overtly grotesque. These two contrasting views of using the grotesque or being used by the grotesque highlight the different powers that the grotesque holds. Sometimes it provides a freedom for the author, while at other times it uses the author to reveal itself. Because of *Sandman*'s popularity and compelling story, Gaiman's use of the grotesque, the purposes to which he employs it, and the various techniques involved, deserve in-depth consideration.

Notably, even though Gaiman was born in England, *Sandman* is an American comic, as Gaiman has made his home in America, it was drawn by many American artists and, most importantly published by and American company. Indeed, the mainstream comics' world in America is dominated by a uniquely American perspective because foreign comics have only just begun to be imported in mass. Thus, understanding what the American grotesque is compared to the overall perception of the grotesque is important. Davis Tully focuses on just this aspect: "And what is 'the American Grotesque[5]'? The American Grotesque is that element in American popular and pop culture that accentuates the freakish aspect of the carnival that is American culture: the freak show at the edge of town . . . but it is closer to nature than high culture. It is earthier – it welcomes chaos" (16). To Tully, and to most Americans, the grotesque is linked with the carnivelesque because most people's first conscious encounter with the grotesque is in terms of the freaks at a circus rather than monsters in any true meaning of that word. This aspect reflects Clayborough's loose description of the grotesque as something that is merely "bizarre" or "outlandish" (9). This aspect of the grotesque is present, but should not be overly focused upon even as it proves helpful because when something is bizarre it suggests that it is also intriguing, but when something is outlandish, it suggest that it is over the top. When these two aspects are combined, they create a moment of great power, of transcendence that could easily be connected to what it means to be sublime, as Longinus defines it.

The two words, the grotesque and the sublime, are linked because together they represent the extreme, which is achieved through their being able to achieve transcendence. These two are not mutually exclusive as seen in their definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It defines grotesque in several ways including the following: "Characterized by distortion or unnatural

[5] The American Grotesque is important to *Sandman*, even though Gaiman is British, because of the audience, artists, and form and because, DC directly connects itself to America.

combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre" ("Grotesque," def. 2a.), and "[l]udicrous from incongruity; fantastically absurd" (Grotesque," def. 3). While the book describes sublime in this way: "Rising to a great height, lofty, towering" ("Sublime," def. 2.), and "[o]f lofty bearing or aspect; in a bad sense, haughty proud" ("Sublime," def. 3.). Both lists of definitions may contain unexpected elements, like the fact that grotesque originates from paintings of half human, half animal forms or that sublime is not always a positive term. Clearly, coming to a lucid, distinct definition is complicated because the words have incurred such different meanings over time. However, one of the most helpful definitions of the sublime is Longinus' description. To him, it should "transport us with wonder" rather than "merely persuad[ing] or gratify[ing] us" (Longinus 114). This definition describes the grave difference between beauty and sublimity. Beauty can, and does, persuade and gratify us, but sublimity goes beyond that. When a person looks at what is sublime, he sees beyond the reality into something greater because he is transported by it. In this same way, the grotesque acts differently than what is merely ugly. Ugliness can dissuade or displease us, but the grotesque goes beyond this. In fact, it is very similar to what the sublime does as it takes the reader beyond, giving us a vision that is not of the current reality.

In fact, even if there were a concrete definition to work with, understanding what could be considered grotesque versus what could be considered sublime would also prove troublesome. Umberto Eco, in his book *History of Beauty*, explores this idea when he discusses monsters in art and how the ugly can be made beautiful. He relates how a culture's idea of beauty and ugliness largely depend on that culture and how each culture's ideal differs, at least slightly, from another's. In the end, deciding whether or not this relic from this people group is a depiction of their idea of what is sublime or of what is grotesque becomes almost impossible (Eco 131, 133). What one culture accepts as the epitome of beauty, another culture rejects. For example, an

American writer might depict the binding of feet by the Chinese as grotesque in his story, but if a Chinese person were to read this story, he might view this image as a perfectly acceptable way to reach towards the sublime and so miss the point the writer was attempting to make. Thus, it is clear how these two terms can often be confused or misattributed to the other.

Typically, if words are able to be interchanged, they must share common elements between them, as it is with the grotesque and the sublime. In some ways, the grotesque can also be linked to what Julia Kristeva wrote about in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. For example, when she is discussing the nature of the abject, which can be linked with the grotesque, within herself, she draws on the connection of it to the sublime: "In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment of the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being" (Kristeva 11). In this way, it is better to look at the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful to better understand the relationship between the grotesque and the ugly. Furthermore, Kristeva's ending point fits well with the connection of the grotesque to the sublime: "While everything else – its archeology and its exhaustion – is only literature: the sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us – and 'that cancels our existence' (Céline)" (210). The burst of beauty that appears at the collapse reflects the transcendent nature demanded by sublimity, which is present in the grotesque. When a truly grotesque image is presented to a viewer, especially in the context of a story, as happens with comics, there can be a moment of surprising beauty tied with it, which challenges the mind in the very way it seems contradictory.

Beyond the connection between the grotesque and the sublime, there is also a connection between the grotesque and the beautiful. Flannery O'Connor, an American author who freely

used the grotesque, believed that there was beauty in the grotesque: "When visitors to her farm, like visitors to her fiction, miss the beauty of the grotesques, O'Connor treats their response as both a moral and an aesthetic problem. These visitors have turned off their imaginations to see only with their minds, their definition of beauty [is] controlled by society's definition of perfection" (Lake 97). In fact, most people who are enraptured by the grotesque find it hard to relate to those who are simply disgusted with it because they want to share their enchantment. On the other hand, many artists have created works that are not so much pleasing to the eye as they are challenging. These artists enjoy forcing the viewer to behold something unlovely while still expecting them to find the beauty. This challenge is certainly not impossible, but it does not appeal to everyone, which further points out how the grotesque in comics adds a kind of literariness to it because of its paradoxical nature. Comics are further matured by the nature of the grotesque's appealing and simultaneously repulsive aspect.

However, the way the grotesque plays out is dependent very much on the medium in which it is being presented. If a film is full of the grotesque, many people may not be able to stomach it, even if they thoroughly enjoyed the book on which the film is based. Furthermore, one painting of a grotesque image might not be as powerful as a series that creates a truly disturbing story, as seen within comics. Thus, the medium of comics gives the grotesque more power than the medium of prose. This fact might reflect why the grotesque has so often been prevalent in comics, if sadly lacking from comics criticism and theory.

The grotesque aspects in the medium of comics have been present almost from the beginning. Before the Comics Code Authority, EC Comics used to draw almost exclusively from the elements of the grotesque. This is seen most notably in their bi-monthly publication *Tales from the Crypt* (see fig. 1), with whole stories built on the idea of the grotesque and how it

affects people. However, it was after the Comics Code Authority that the grotesque in comics fully manifested itself. The underground comics that were being drawn "broke one particular taboo by being some of the first *deliberately* ugly comics (as opposed to just inept). Their lusty

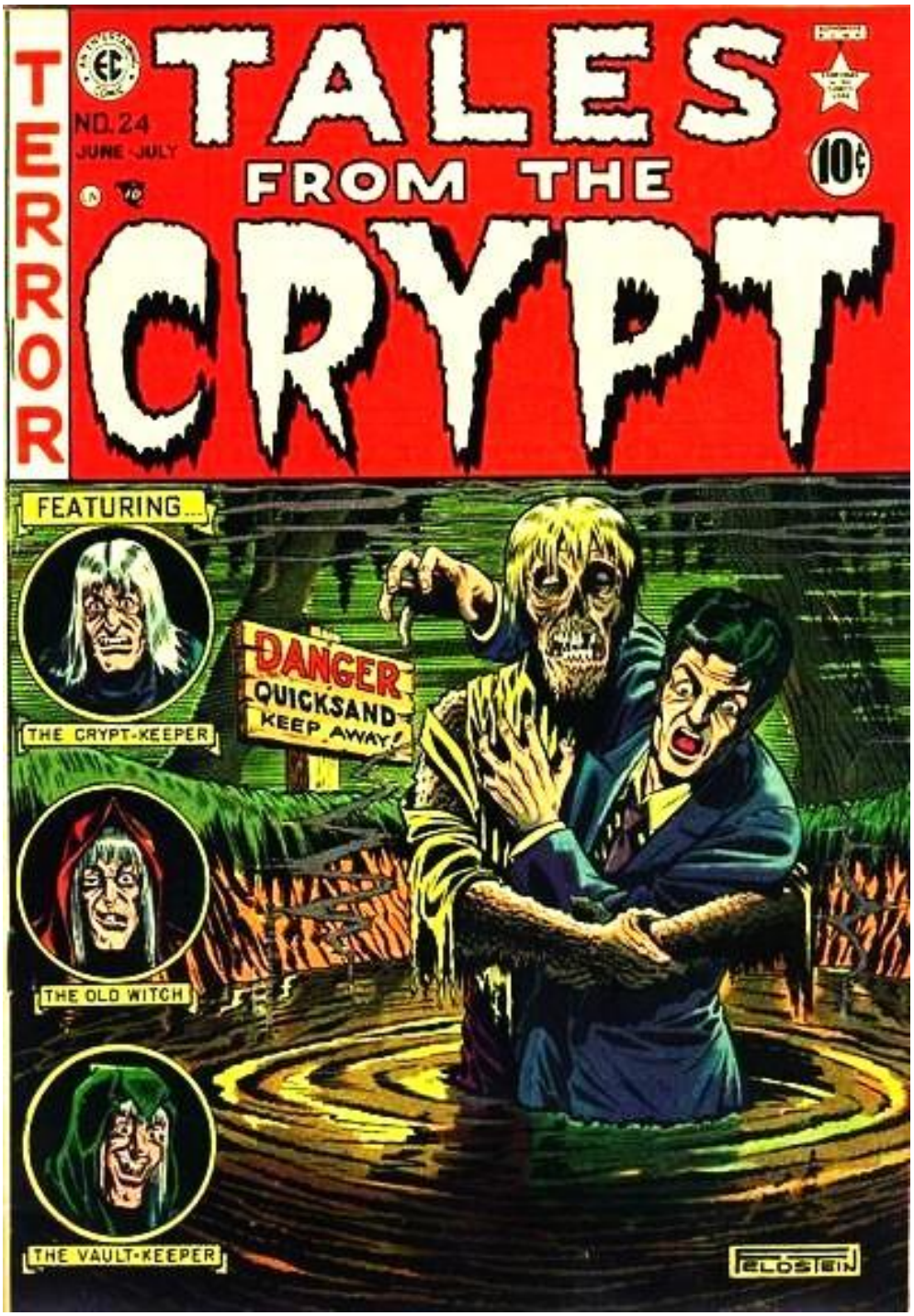

Fig. 1. Cover of June/July issue of *Tales of the Crypt*.

indulgence of gross little details and unsavory subjects . . . was just as much a declaration of their alienation from the cultural mainstream" (Wolk 40). They were not ugly because the artists were poor craftsman but because the artists wanted to them to be so. In fact, Wolk illuminates an important aspect to the appeal of drawing ugly comics as those in the underground celebrated in doing. Drawing comics that did not immediately appeal to someone in respect to its beauty identified those who did enjoy it as counterculturists because when people look at an image and find it beautiful, they experience camaraderie since they both had a similarly pleasing experience when looking at the image; however, if one finds an image that is unappealing beautiful in some respect, he feels more alone, knowing that the person next to him might not be seeing that beauty (40). In this way, the underground comic creators were able to separate the readers they did not want from those they thought could handle their unique work. They felt it was important to distance themselves from the typically beautiful comics being printed in the mainstream. Interestingly, before the underground decided to focus on their creation of the grotesque, it operated as something of a tool used by revolutionaries: "In nineteenth-century French literature the phrase 'the grotesque' acquires revolutionary overtones; it is associated with artistic freedom and the overthrow of cramping conventions" (Clayborough 13). Thus, the grotesque has often been linked with artistic movements towards freedom instead of being stifled in the constraints of the overall culture, which is clearly seen in the underground movement of the comics. However, when the transformation occurred in the eighties and the more mainstream allowed itself to become more grotesque, this experience could be found in comics published by DC and Marvel.

Since the image is what first grabs the comic readers', or prospective buyers', attention, on each page, the grotesque wields a weighty power. In fact, in many ways the grotesque is what

controls the story. This attitude that the grotesque creates does more than simply set and influence the tone of the piece because of the nature of the grotesque and its power and how it becomes the story. In fact, the ideas put forth by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* about the grotesque body further support the idea of the grotesque's power in the story. He discusses how the grotesque brings down the subject from the abstract to the concrete: "Thus, in the grotesque concept of the body a new, concrete, and realistic historic awareness was born and took form: not abstract thought about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history" (367). So, in an intriguing way, just as the grotesque pulls the abstract into something concrete and seemingly graspable, the visual aspects of comics pull down the abstract nature of words into something concrete and seemingly graspable. For example, if a person were to mention "the dream king," everyone else pictures his own specific idea of what that would like, but, if that same person drew the dream king instead of merely speaking it, everyone is forced to understand the words from the perspective of the artist in a way that cannot be achieved through mere words. Thus, with these two, the visual and the grotesque, working in tandem there appears to be a double layer of abstractness being transformed into the concrete. However, just as two different people can look at a picture and perceive two different things, these two people can respond to the grotesque in different ways, which means that the concreteness of what is represented is more ephemeral than might be hoped for. Even so, for the individual the abstract nature does seem lessened, which means that the grotesque in the story directs the understanding of what is presented because it appears to be graspable, which means that it is what the reader attempts to grasp.

Hence, the grotesque reaches beyond the tone of a piece, which it definitely influences, and pushes further inside the work to manipulate and regulate what is going to occur in the story

and how the story will be perceived – it is at the heart of the story. Thus, comics which have a high quantity of the grotesque operate under two paradoxes. The first is that though the image brings the abstract to the concrete it also widens the ability for interpretation because words can be direct and tell exactly what is meant to be taken away. The second is that the grotesque can bring the abstract into the concrete but cannot be completely reliable since the viewer experiences both repulsion and allure. The importance of images is revealed by "Gorgias, a Sophist who lived just before Aristotle began writing . . . He points out that 'frightening sights' are capable of 'extinguishing and excluding thought' and thus causing madness" (LaGrandeur 120-21). This kind of power is reflected most truly in the elements of the grotesque. Furthermore, LaGrandeur goes on to say, "The image can be seductive to the point of distraction, and this can be detrimental for both the authors and the audiences" (127). This is especially true if the author forgets this and allows the visual to completely control the story, instead of being an aid, which is why it is so easy for the grotesque images in a comic to control the plot and understanding of a comic.

In fact, in comics the control that the grotesque wields is made more powerful still by the nature of the drawing. Many comics sport a cartoonish feel, which means, according to McCloud, that the viewer will see himself in the comic rather than another person (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. McCloud *Understanding Comics* 36

Thus, if the viewer is more prone to see himself in a cartoon, then the viewer will be quicker to place himself in the proverbial shoes of the grotesque image, making himself grotesque. This is a large part of the power of the grotesque because as humans, we are both intrigued and repelled by the grotesque. We both want to take a closer look and run in the opposite direction because we fear what we see as ourselves while also wondering how much of it is truly real. This idea makes comics more powerful as a medium, as opposed to say film, because they are able to create something impossible in the real world. For example, at one point McCloud is discussing the panel as an icon, and to illustrate has himself taking off his "skin" in order to show the skull underneath (see fig. 3). The grotesque in comics is able to use what people know to build a new,

Fig. 3. McCloud *Understanding Comics* 98

but strange world where men are able to take off their own skin, which means the reader is no longer focusing on what is being said but on the strange thing being shown.

However, perhaps it would make more sense to say that the story is what is dictating the elements of the grotesque. The idea that if the story is gentler than the grotesque is or if the story

is going to be more aggressive, then it would follow that the grotesque elements would be more aggressive as well. Maybe it does not make sense to give the power to the elements of the grotesque since they did not create themselves but were created intentionally by the author and the artist. This person is merely using the grotesque as an element of storytelling, much like humor or pathos, all of which lead to an element of control of the story.

Nonetheless, this supposition would be a mere simplification of the grotesque because unlike humor and pathos, the grotesque has a deeper connection to the reader, which can be exemplified by *Sandman*. As Bakhtin mentioned about the grotesque removing things from the abstract, humor and pathos and other elements akin to those are elusive and unable to be grasped. Part of what makes the grotesque so important is what it reveals about humans and their need to take part in it. In the same way humans need beauty, they appear to need the grotesque or to at least be intrinsically intrigued by it. Thus, when it is present in any work of art, but especially comics, its control and power is manifold because it is what the reader is going to take note of and what he will allow to interrupt the understanding of the story for him. For example, when the Hecateae is summoned (see fig. 4), the pull of the grotesque is palpably present as each witch

Fig. 4. Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 73

changes from the maiden to the mother to the crone, changing who is embodying the truly grotesque. Even with all that is being said and the beauty of the maiden, the reader will still be focused on her eating of the rat and the dominating figure of the crone, which shows the power that the grotesque has on a given page.

The use of the grotesque and the way it controls the story in comics is even more intriguing when connected specifically to *Sandman* because of the clear way that it does act in the story of Sandman's tragedy. First of all, *Sandman* is a story all about Dream, and he is not human; therefore, he is a monster, which means he is part of the grotesque, but, as is typical with the grotesque, there is something attractive about Dream. The entire series seems to concern itself with asking how Dream can be categorized. Also, Gaiman has remarked that he feels like he found his voice in "24 Hours" (issue 6 of *Sandman*) because he "realized on a gut level, not just an intellectual one, that [he] was writing a story about stories" (qtd. in Bender 36). Indeed, the entire *Sandman* series is concerned with storytelling, which is especially interesting since the grotesque in comics is such a storytelling technique with such power. This aspect of *Sandman* is important to the grotesque because "the function of the image-making process which produces the grotesque is to disarm the potentially disruptive, demonic elements of human experience by using the comic to distort their manifestation in myth, dream and art" (Morgan 17). *Sandman* draws on each aspect – myth, dream, and art – in the course of each of the stories, which is what connects it so inherently with the grotesque as each of these, at least to some extent, is built from the grotesque.

Ultimately, the entire story of *Sandman* reveals the grotesque's power in a comic as it controls and directs the story. Without the grotesque, Gaiman's comic would be drastically different and would lose much of its value and potency. In fact, the very form of *Sandman* allows

the grotesque to overtly control the direction and understanding of the story. The aggressive visual present in comics sanctions the grotesque to never be ignored as each story unfolds. Thus, the elements and images of the grotesque are allowed to dominate comics in a way that prose pieces are never quite able to accomplish.

Chapter Three

Overtly Powerful: The Grotesque in the First Five Books of *Sandman*

Looking at the grotesque in comics is important because of the visual aspect in comics, which means that the grotesque has more power than in typical literature. Any visual medium incorporating grotesque elements is going to draw on its power in a clearer way than non-visual mediums. Thus, its presence in comics is more powerful and is even more regularly used because comics, at least in the past, have been of certain genres, such as science fiction, fantasy, and horror, that draw frequently on the grotesque, which means that when the grotesque is used in comics it is often employed to display the literariness of this medium. However, like most literary theories, this perspective works better with some texts than others since the grotesque is given more power in certain instances. One such text is Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (see fig. 5),

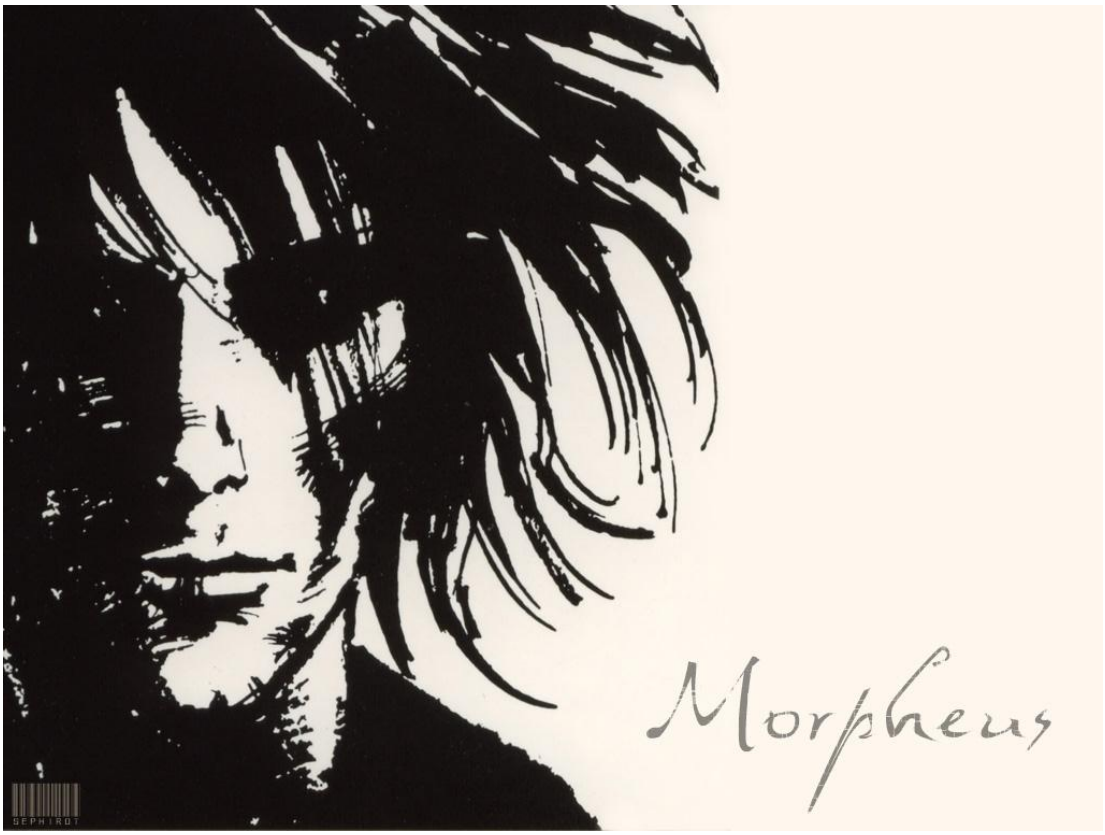

Fig. 5 Vertigo Trading Card of Morpheus

which is markedly full of the grotesque. In this series, the grotesque reveals the power that it has by showing how the literariness of comics is often linked to the grotesque. Gaiman uses the grotesque liberally throughout his work, but as he writes this series across a decade his use of the grotesque evolves. In fact, in the first five volumes of *Sandman*, Gaiman shows how powerful the grotesque can be in controlling, directing, and leading the story, yet in the beginning stages Gaiman has yet to get full grasp of the influence these wield.

In fact, comics is one of the only forums that allows this kind of development because they, often, are written over many months, and in *Sandman*'s case over many years as it was published monthly from 1989 to 1996. This series was not the first comic that Gaiman participated in, but it was early in his career. Also, it was certainly the first of this magnitude because the other comics he had done, such as *Violent Cases* and *Black Orchid*, which were much shorter, meaning that the length of *Sandman* allowed for the development and evolution of the grotesque. Thus, in *Sandman*, Gaiman was finding his own footing within the comic world and was, at first, a freeing project: "*The Sandman* was a failed DC Comics property[6] in limbo, so there were no expectations when a novice comics writer from Britain turned him into a pale shrouded Lord of Dreams. Neil Gaiman recalls, 'There is a joy to being allowed to create something while you don't know what you're doing. The joy of *Sandman* was the freedom to fail'" (Gravett 89). His freedom in *Sandman* also led to a time of discovery for himself as a writer and developer of comics. One of which was learning how to manipulate and control his story effectively.

[6] Comic writing is a little different than might be expected by one familiar with prose publication. The two main powerhouses of comics are DC and Marvel, and anything that is created, any characters or countries or powers, belongs to the company and not tot the originator. They usually still credit the creators, but the power of what to do with the characters rests in DC's or Marvel's hands, especially if the writer has moved on to other projects. This is why *Sandman* is situated, sometimes awkwardly, in the DC universe and is why Batman, Superman and other well-known DC characters make occasional appearances in *Sandman*.

Thus, the readers were able to observe Gaiman as he built story arcs into a final, poignant tragedy, underlined by the subtly of the grotesque in the latter parts of *Sandman*, especially evident when they are compared to the first ones. Even so, the popularity and critical claim of *Sandman* has been well noted. It has been called "one of the greatest achievements in serialized modern comic books" (Cowsill et al. 238) and has proven itself as such because of its ability to be "as accessible to the casual reader as it [is] to the diehard comic fan" (Cowsill et al. 238). This achievement, much harder to appreciate twenty years from *Sandman*'s beginning, is quite remarkable. Comics had built for themselves a bad name – a medium that was not only constrained by its demographic but also by its continuity. This continuity created many stories that the casual reader could not understand. If a person was intrigued by comics and wanted to begin reading them, he would feel uncomfortable with all the knowledge he did not have, which meant that the comic industry often lost its readers before it was given a fair chance. This problem makes Gaiman's ability within *Sandman* so notable. He brought many new readers to comics because his piece was so accessible in that it was not being built on a former story with years of history. Instead, it, and the characters within it, was a new creation that the readers could find a beginning and end to. Gaiman introduced his own mythology in *Sandman* of the Endless, seven entities that were not gods or heroes per se. They simply were their function, which is why the Sandman is dreaming and his sister Death is death. Matthew Pustz says that "*Sandman* was Veritgo's [a new imprint DC created to focus on a more adult audience] most important title . . . [and] it quickly developed a highly committed readership" (85). The commitment of *Sandman*'s readers was important because it made this series a highly valuable commodity for DC, which is why *Sandman* was able to run for such a long time under one writer.

Sandman is a comic that has garnered a great deal of popularity and critical acclaim, which is why it is important to study. Bradford W. Wright notes that DC "enjoyed critical favor with fans for its auteur-oriented Vertigo line. This included the most acclaimed title of the decade, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Steeped in rich tradition of mythology and English literature and featuring a stylish goth-punk look, *Sandman* won an enthusiastic audience of black-clothed, collegiate, and, most notably, female readers" (290). *Sandman*'s popularity and critical acclaim have been proved by the fact that it has been on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, is the only comic to ever win the World Fantasy Award, and is considered "a comic book for intellectuals" by well-respected authors (Anderson). The literariness of *Sandman* was revealed, in part, by its firm foundation and grounding in the literature that had passed before it. As described by Rocco Versaci, comic books should be viewed in the context of literariness: "These creators aim to expose an artificial split between so-called "high" and "low" culture, where "literature" is a clear example of the former and comic books of the latter. One comic book that has addressed this dubious split is Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1987-96), which remains one of the medium's most literate and engaging series" (200). In fact, Versaci describes how *Sandman*, among other works, is an assault on the cannon; however, he says that "the assault is less on the content of the canon than on the very idea of it" (209). This aspect of *Sandman* is vital to the creation and understanding of what this comic means for our culture. Clearly, *Sandman* has revealed itself to be of grave importance because people enjoy it, laud it, and read it, not caring if it is accepted by a distant world that they see the canon to be.

To look at *Sandman* a little more closely is important when considering its prominence in the culture. Thus, it shall be reviewed in context of the grotesque elements throughout it, how these element progress and impact the story, how the elements ultimately control much of the

story, and how these elements impact the literariness of the comic as a whole while Gaiman recreates various cultures' myths. The control that the grotesque exercises over the story is dependent largely on the mechanics of reading. In order for a story to be read, a person must be involved, and this person will dictate how the story unfolds according to how the medium is set up. In comics, the visual is what immediately assaults the eye; a fact that should not downplay the text but should highlight the enormous power inherent in the visual aspects. Since these visuals occupy the reader's mind first, they are also what commands and directs the reader's eye as he peruses the visual. Looking at each of the volumes of *Sandman* in order of how they were published, which is how most people will read them, is key to understanding the progressive nature of the grotesque in this work. While Gaiman wrote *Sandman*, the grotesque evolved and became a subtler part of the story, which led to the comic's literariness to be expanded under the elements of the grotesque.

Preludes and Nocturnes

In *Sandman*'s very beginning, Gaiman presents the elements of the grotesque as they were first defined as the decorative carvings, but as the story continues to unfold, he adds other grotesque elements into the story, allowing its encompassing meaning defined by Kayser and Bakhtin to flourish. The classic elements that first necessitated the word grotesque to be coined are used on the very first page of *Preludes and Nocturnes* in the first story "Sleep of the Just" (see fig. 6). The first panel includes a stately, austere manor with winged gargoyle-esque screeching statues on the brick pedestals, while the fifth panel reveals a golden, horned door-knocker, suggestive of the old architecture found in many churches and other buildings that included gargoyles as part of their aesthetic. These elements work to set the tone of the story, creating an ominous, alienating manner, which continues on the next page with the interposed

Fig. 6 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 13

framing of ornate sculptings, which would typically be present on buildings (see fig. 7). The interposed framing reflects the nature of the grotesque at the beginning of its definition in that it

Fig. 7 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 14

is both present and a part of the architecture but it is also completely other and separated from the rest of the picture by its obvious distinction from reality. Thus, Gaiman begins his entire series where the elements of the grotesque first began.

As if Gaiman was following the transformation of the definition of the grotesque, the next few pages reveal these ideas. The heads of monsters are present, most notably Dream's mask, and the men in the manor become monsters themselves as their features are inflated and overemphasized. The depictions of these exaggerated features are delivered so effectively because of the way they are drawn and inked (see fig. 8). The father, as he walks behind his son,

Fig. 8 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 16

looks utterly alien and inhuman, creating a monster. The use of shadow and light in this volume shows how the characters who are presented are exaggerated, intensified, and often distorted. Much of this technique has to do with the fact that at the time *Sandman's* first issue was created (it went on sale in October of 1988, but published as the January issue of 1989) comics had to be drawn in pen and ink for printing purposes, in order for them "to fit the technology of reproduction" (McCloud *Reinventing Comics* 68), which forced the shading to be completed by different methods of crosshatching or short, abrupt lines to indicate the transition from stronger light to darker. These elements all lend themselves to the grotesque as seen in these two images, especially in the third panel. The father is reduced to a mask-like head with the rest of his skin swallowed by the darkness that overwhelms the page, while the young boy appears gaunt and sickly because of the crushing dark overtaking him (Gaiman 16). These elements show how the sophistication of the grotesque progressed from merely statues or bas reliefs attached to buildings to human representations, which are both more chilling in the reflection of reality and more alienating in its foreign aspects, which created a very specific atmosphere for the story of *Sandman*. This paradox that the grotesque represents, the man yet still monster embodied by the father, shows how the grotesque links comics to literariness because it plumbs the depths of humanity and reveals the complicated nature of fear, longing, desire, and confusion.

With just these four pages of this first story, it is clear how the grotesque elements dominate the story as soon as it begins. They are what set the tone, perspective, and understanding with which this story is going to be read. In fact, Thierry Groensteen, a prominent French scholar of comics, mentions in her introduction to *The System of Comics* that the "idea that comics are essentially a mixture of text and images, a specific combination of linguistic and visual codes, a meeting place between two 'subjects of expression'" is incorrect (3). She

continues to explain that within comics there is a privileging of the image (3) because this is the element that demands the reader's immediate attention. Thus, the images being shown to the reader are not merely important to the story being unfolded; they actually control much of the story, especially when compared to the written words of the comic. Will Eisner goes on to say, "Artwork dominates the reader's initial attention" (128), which further supports how important the images are to the reader. Thus, the grotesque is able to take on a more dominant role in the story, which means it exercises more power, allowing its own paradoxical nature to influence the themes of the work it is operating within. So, when the grotesque is present on the visual page of the comic, it literally grips the reader and forces an attitude in the story.

Looking at the grotesque elements in *Preludes and Nocturnes*' "24 Hours" reveals how the grotesque overtly controls the outcome and the understanding of the story. Essentially, this short story is about what makes up a human and the life he leads. However, it is presented in such a bold, aggressive, and, often, disgusting way that Gaiman mentions, "A lot of readers said they stopped buying *Sandman* after issue 6 ["24 Hours"] and didn't come back for ages, until they were told it was safe" (qtd. in Bender 35), which means that people stopped reading *Sandman* in its serialized form because this story frightened, disturbed, and bothered them so much they thought they were done with this comic altogether, until their friends told them that *Sandman* did not stay quite so frightening, and, although "24 Hours" is not necessarily the apex of the extreme use of the grotesque in *Sandman*, it is a concentrated use of the repulsive aspects of the grotesque that neglects the balance needed with the grotesque. Instead, it becomes disgusting, losing the strange appeal that the grotesque usually possesses. This idea reflects the fact that the grotesque often alienates the viewer because it is something that has an element of foreignness to it, but, even more disturbing, it is always something that represents a part of

reality and truth. Thus, in "24 Hours" the often small-minded people in the restaurant slowly become transformed into the worst monsters of themselves, which means that the reader is able to see how he himself could easily make such a transformation as the character had undergone because of how the grotesque operates as it pulls the viewer in, showing the disturbing similarities of the viewer with the grotesque since the viewer places himself in the picture as well.

"24 Hours" begins with a mundane description of a professional waitress. It details what she is thinking as she meets with each of the other players in the tragedy. She is, of course, a writer who is merely waitressing for the ability to research her subjects, which means that she describes how she views them at the same time the artist is drawing how they really are. The first four pages of the story are dominated by a quiet realistic feel with mere hints at the grotesque elements that will appear more aggressively later. However, on the fifth page the monstrous face of Doctor Dee, pale, fierce, cadaverous, and intensely other worldly, which reflects Dee's personality, dominates everything else by its strangeness and piercing nature (see fig. 9). Right

Fig. 9 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 163

away, the feel of the story is transformed and set to go down a new path than what first seemed evident. The horrifying features of each person in the restaurant are revealed, which quickly builds in its intensity as more and more grotesque elements are being employed. First there are just the day dreams the characters are forced to indulge in, which don't have to be grotesque, except Mark's feet are intensified, Garry's smile is distorted, and Kate is holding a plate with Gary's head on it (Gaiman 168), which is part of how Kayser, among others, defines the grotesque: any human who is presented with his features exaggerated, intensified, or distorted (181-83). (see fig. 10). Next, Doctor Dee allows them to praise him, as he is the very picture of a

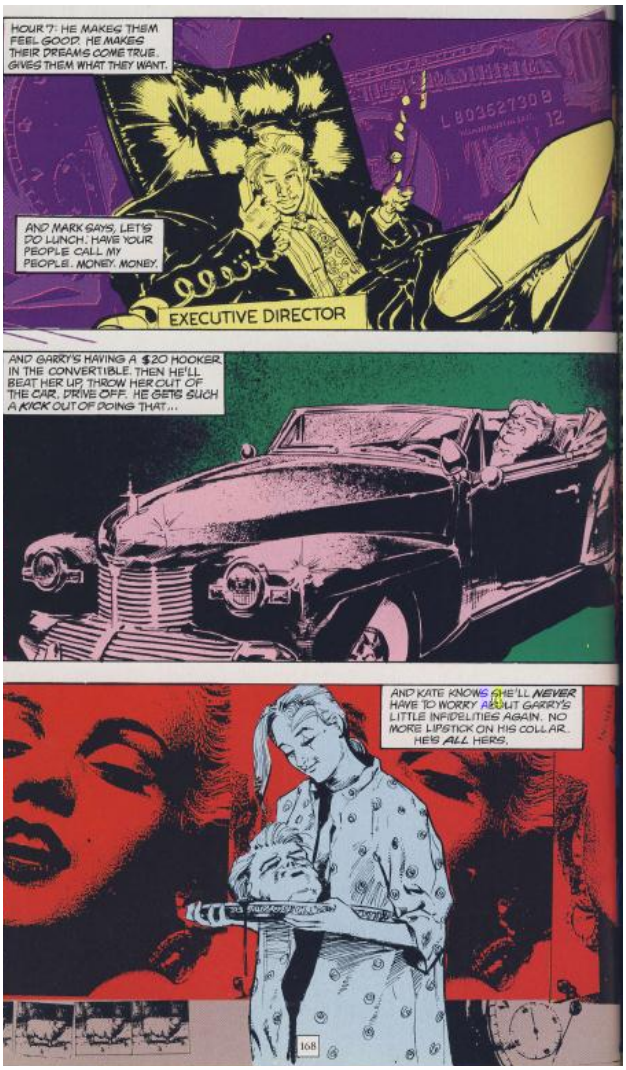

Fig. 10 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 168

monster, and the grotesque image is clear, especially as he feasts on the fingers of the people who gladly give them to him. This deterioration continues until the people become literal monsters themselves, as seen in the artist's visual depiction of them (see fig.11). Thus, before the

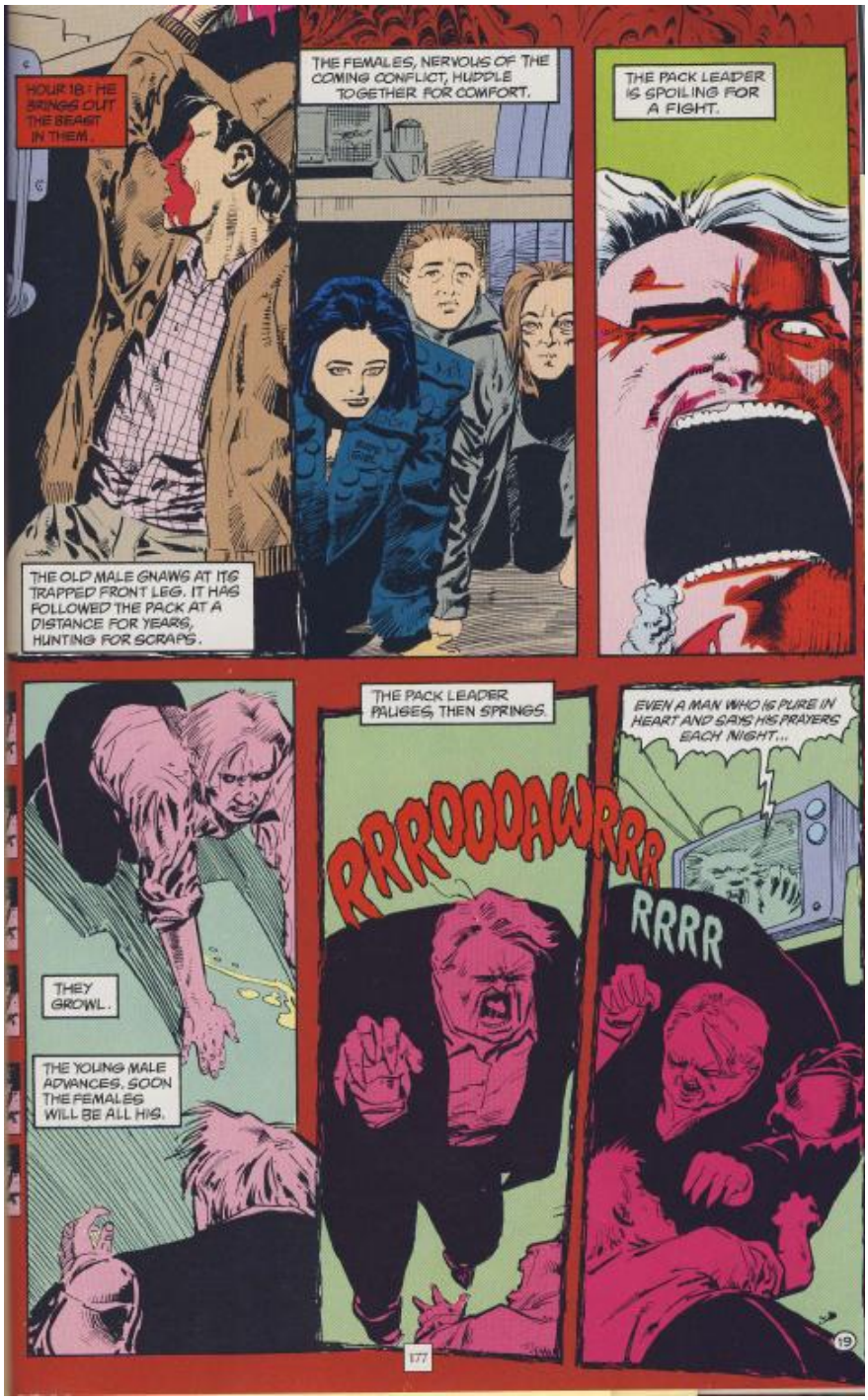

Fig. 11 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 177

grotesque was present in this story, which as Bakhtin mentioned always brings ideas from the abstract into the concrete, the characters were free to dream in the abstract and be simple representations of what everyone sees everyday but knows they cannot understand. However, as soon as the grotesque makes its appearance, the story has to change to become something further than the abstract as it grows chillingly more real until its brutal conclusion (see fig. 12). The

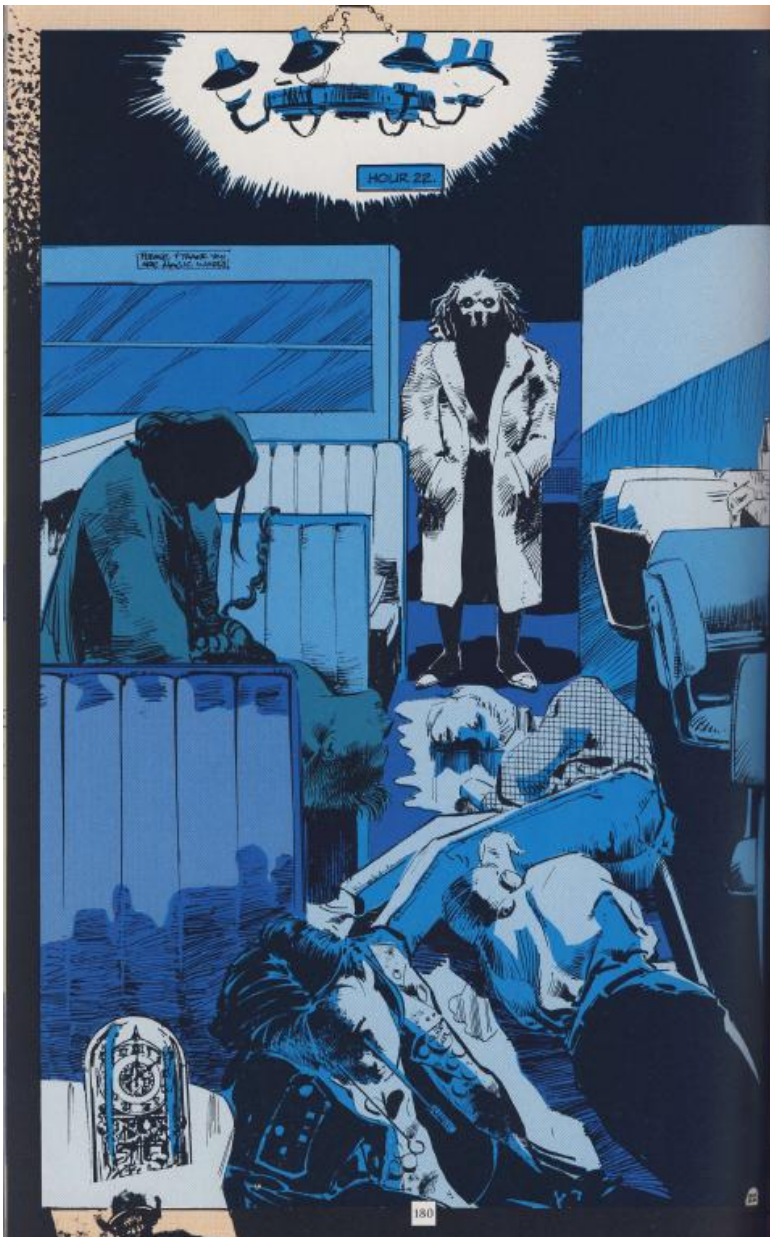

Fig. 12 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 180

daydreams of the patrons of the café are stolen from them and replaced with vicious reality, the reality of who they truly are under the pretending and pandering exhibited by them, because the grotesque forces them to see life as it is rather than as they might wish it to be. The dreams that they had were pleasant enough until the embodiment of the unpleasant, Doctor Dee, whose gruesome appearance connected him right away with the grotesque, appeared and quite literally gave them their terrifying dreams that horrify and haunt what they should be.

On the other hand, the grotesque does not have to be brutal and revolting because sometimes the grotesque can seem pleasant and appealing, which further represents the paradox of the grotesque. This idea has been suggested in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and with the monsters that humans have related to and not been horrified by such as angels, mermaids, and centaurs. Even though the grotesque appears to be more benign in such instances, the pleasantness does not lessen its power. Indeed, there has always been a draw to the grotesque and a need to see the deformities in people, from the sideshows on Coney Island to modern horror movies. For example, the last story in *Preludes and Nocturnes* is called "The Sound of Her Wings," and introduces the character of death. On the cover of this issue (see fig. 13) Death is

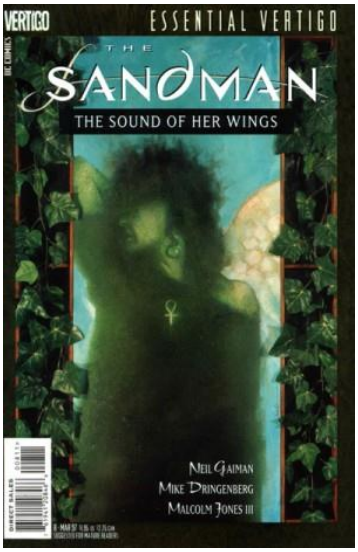

Fig. 13 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 210

shown as a young woman with wings, something which is by its very definition grotesque since it combines an element of an animal with a human. However, she looks beautiful, which echoes the idea that Umberto Eco identifies, that the grotesque does not show "the negation of Beauty, but its other face" (321). In this connection, the grotesque can be a healing agent or a way to expand the mind of the reader even as it controls the story, which ties back to the correlation between the grotesque and the sublime, as seen in chapter two. In this story, Dream's sister Death, who can best be described by Wallace Stevens saying, "Death is the mother of beauty" (qtd. in Bender 240), visits him in the park as he is feeding the birds. He is sullen and sad since his quest has come to an end, and she has stopped by to cheer him up. The grotesque aspects of this piece in the beginning (see fig. 14 and 15), which are made up of the wings of the birds and

Fig. 14 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 212

Fig. 15 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 213

Dream's inhuman face, are peaceful and gentle in many ways as is the story, but when Death has to leave their conversation to carry out her work, which is to take people off of this plane of being, the grotesque elements become uglier and more overt, as seen in the corpulent man who

dies on his couch with a picture of a skull on his wall or when the comedian is electrocuted (see fig. 16). As seen embodied in this story, what form the grotesque takes will be exemplified in the

Fig. 16 Gaiman *Preludes and Nocturnes* 226

story itself. When the grotesque elements are gentle, the story is able to be so, just as when the grotesque elements are more aggressive the story is as well. Essentially, in *Sandman* the grotesque is used to enliven the story because Gaiman's main concern is always the story. In fact, *Sandman* is essentially a story about stories and how they are unchanging, as seen in his use of the old myths, and constantly changing, as he rejuvenates these tales, which is reflected in his use of the comic grotesque.

The Doll's House

The next story arc that Gaiman begins in *Sandman* breaks away from Dream and introduces several grotesque characters that direct the plot. In fact, this part first introduces two of Dream's siblings: Desire and Despair. Desire's home is a grotesque representation of himself/herself (Desire is both male and female) with a hole in his/her chest cavity to reveal the heart (see fig. 17). This image reveals the very nature of who Desire[7] is. He/she is appealing and yet, somehow, repulsive because of the dual-sex nature Desire has, which is why he/she fits the idea of the grotesque as he/she is recognizably human and yet not. On the other hand, Desire's, and Dream's, sister Despair is also introduced, and from the first introduction of Despair in "The Doll's House: Part One," her grotesqueness is capitalized on as she is pictured ripping her skin and causing herself to bleed (see fig. 18). In fact, she is often referred to as "grotesque" (Wagner, Golden, and Bissette 145) because everything she is about is linked to the grotesque, the way her teeth are small and sharp, like an animal's, her nakedness, and her general appearance of a small monster. Both of these characters – Desire and Despair – orchestrate the driving plot point in this volume.

[7] The allegorical implication of the dual sexuality of Desire is illuminating, as it plays with roles of sexuality (who has what inclinations and whether or not those are a sin), how humans are born, and what is perceived as right or wrong.

Fig. 17 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 40

Fig. 18 *The Doll's House* 44

Just a bit after the introduction of the twins Desire and Despair, like twinned aspects of the grotesque, Lucien tells Dream of the dreamland entities that are still missing (see fig. 19).

Fig. 19 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 52

These four are what drive the rest of the plot, and each is distinctly grotesque in its own way. The first two introduced are Brute and Glob who are oddly shaped monsters: one like a giant, the other like a ball with arms and legs. These two monsters inhabit a Windsor McCay dreamland (see fig. 20), which, because of the way it is drawn with smooth round, welcoming lines and cheery colors, does not show them at their truly grotesque, when they are not masked in a pseudo-idealized world (see fig. 21). The difference is striking because in the first presentation

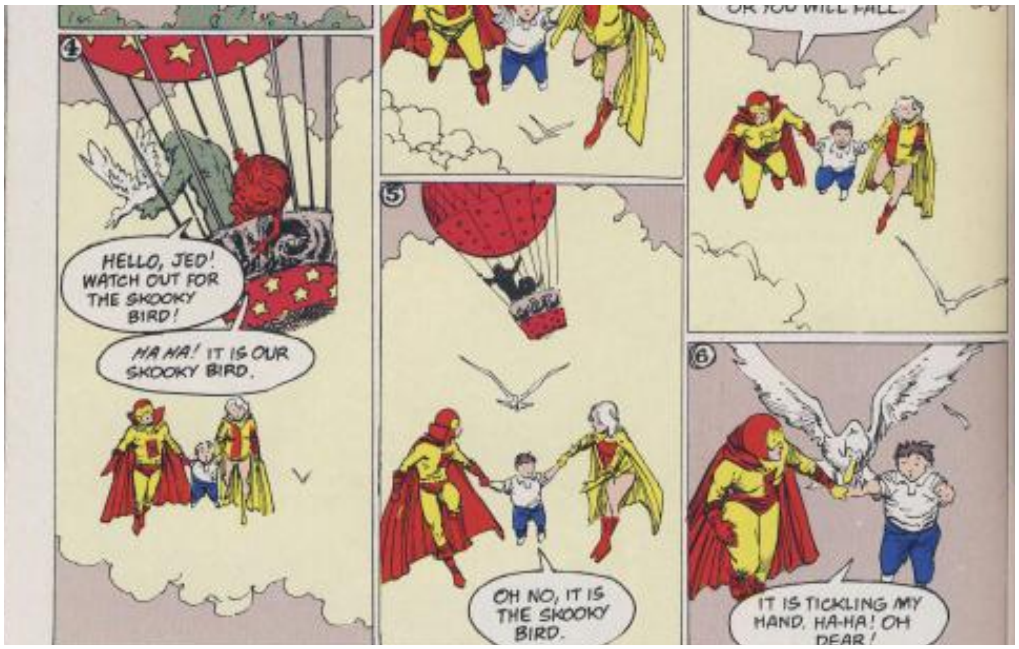

Fig. 20 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 68

Fig. 21 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 91

they are not as important and are more incidental, but in the next incarnation they are overwhelmingly present in the very darkness they exude and in both size and placement, even in the last panel, which does not seem to have anything to do with them.

The next dream person that is missing is the terrifying Corinthian[8]. He drives the story by fear and horror. After the first time he is introduced to the audience, each scene with the Corinthian involved is from his point of view. First, the viewer sees a phone and eye balls on a table, but the next scene with the Corinthian is much more grotesque with him biting off a young man's fingers (see fig. 22). Indeed, the Corinthian is terrifying, and it is his grotesque nature, of

Fig. 22 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 102

[8] So named after the mode of behavior, indulging in luxury and licentiousness. Perhaps, also a direct antithesis for the behavior called for in the Letter to the Corinthians by Paul of Tarsus.

having teeth where his eyes should be, that makes the reader scared for Jed when he climbs into the Corinthian's car. In fact, the Corinthian is the link to the Cereal Convention, a meeting place for serial killers, that allows the plot to move forward. However, the grotesque, as embodied by the Corinthian, directs the reading of the comic quite clearly because his presence forces the reader's attention to note what he might have otherwise overlooked (see fig. 23). At the top part

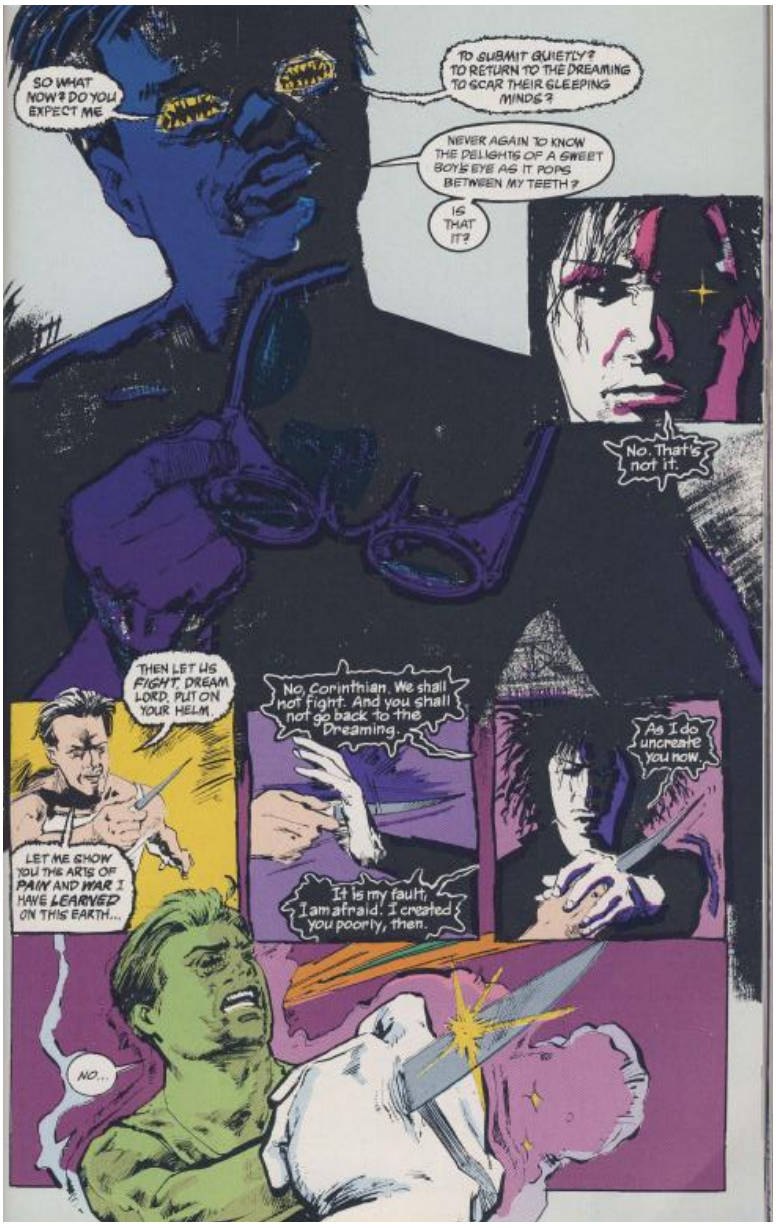

Fig. 23 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 173

of the page, the Corinthian is finally shown without his glasses. The yellow of the teeth immediately draw the viewer's attention to them. Then the eyes are pulled to the bottom of the page where the Corinthian is stabbing Dream in the hand and yelling in dismay. The background of people at the convention is no longer shown because they are not important to the plot at this point when the Corinthian and Dream discuss the Corinthian's end. Then as the Corinthian melts away (see fig. 24), the silent two panels at the top left corner dominate the viewer's attention.

Fig. 24 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 174

These grotesque moments are what direct the viewer. These directions are important in the comic because the grotesque acts as a revelation of the power of the literariness in comics. They reveal that comics are complex paradox ridden pieces of art that cannot simply be meant for young children as they are sophisticated enough for adults.

The last dream entity that needs to be found is a gentle picture of the grotesque. Fiddler's Green is a land that has taken a human form. He is grotesque because he is not a human but a land that has taken the appearance of humanity, something that can only be fully seen through comic imagery. The first presentation of his human form is shown when he is defending Rose (see fig. 25). This view of him, with the crumpled Neo-Nazi bodies at his feet who look like

Fig. 25 Gaiman *The Doll's House* 77

deformed dwarfs themselves, makes him appear almost monstrous. However, as he gently tips his hat to the lady, the viewer goes back to believing that he is a gentle man. Then the close-up of his face is shown, which seems to question the assurance that was just provided. Since the way Fiddler's Green is presented, almost panel by panel, jumps back and forth from something comforting and pleasant to something grotesque and disturbing, he is the epitome of the grotesque. He embodies what is most fearsome about it – the way the grotesque is both like us and not. At one point we feel comfortable with it, and then we are greatly bothered because it is human and not, which is the essence of the grotesque and why it fundamentally links itself to a literariness beyond what comics might be assumed to hold.

This back and forth reflects the way the grotesque works upon the reader as he goes through the comic book, especially *The Doll's House*. This story arc introduces many odd characters that cause us to both relate and be repulsed by them, from the spider sisters who are constantly dressed in pure white wedding garb to the happy landlord who moonlights as a drag queen at night. This story is defined and confined by its grotesque characters and the way they cannot chose to be simply one thing. They are constantly being torn apart by themselves, by their identity questions, and by their assumptions about society. This controlled conflict works to pull the story in the one clear direction where it ends in Fiddler's Green, who is back as a land instead of a pseudo human, and the tension is resolved by Charity graciously giving her life for her granddaughters'.

Dream Country

This volume of *Sandman* is a little different than the other two that have preceded it because it is made up of four diverse short stories, each dealing with the Sandman, some in more obscure ways than others. The four stories build themselves up in separate, unique ways. One is

imbued by darkness and captivity, while another is about dreaming for freedom from individuality. The next is a riotous romp with one of the greatest playwrights ever to have lived, and the last is about letting go of what one hates the most. Together they all reveal elements about the overall tragedy that is pending, but they do so through the grotesque elements that permeates all of the stories. Also, what helps add another layer of the grotesque's power is the depiction of Dream throughout this volume. He is drawn differently with each story because each one is handled by a different artist. Thus, he is very distinct from one story to the next, but he is still himself. In this way, he embodies the comic grotesque as it is a constant push-pull between a balance of similarity and difference with humanity.

The first story "Calliope" plunges right into its overwhelmingly grotesque tone that is constantly pulling the reader along. On the first page (see fig. 26), the reader's eye is pulled to

Fig. 26 Gaiman *Dream Country* 11

either the first panel, a dark, shadowy profile of a man, or to the third, a hand holding a grotesque hairball that looks like many creatures from bad sci-fi films. These two panels war with each other for supremacy because of their equal visual power, but both are grotesque and set off the tone as such. As the story pulls itself along, the darkness only increases along with the grotesque as they appear to go hand in hand. Gaiman draws from the grotesque statues again (see fig. 27) to

Fig. 27 Gaiman *Dream Country* 13

imbue the scene with this particular peculiar feeling. Then the real grotesque is presented to the reader in Erasmus Fry (see fig. 28). His bulbous nose and skeletal smile, immediately link him to

Fig. 28 Gaiman *Dream Country* 15

the grotesque. He carries the reader through, always keeping his Veidt-like smile, directing the reader's mind to the horror of what is to come. The horror that is revealed is Calliope, of the title, who is being held captive by this man, now giving her to a new owner. The grotesque in this piece highlights the grotesqueness of the position that Calliope is in, as she is being repeatedly raped and held as a prisoner to be these writers' muse. Finally, after Calliope has called on Dream for help, the men receive their just reward. In Richard Madoc's life he is given too many ideas to handle. As a result he grotesquely scrawls the ideas on a wall, causing his fingers to bleed, and he rips at himself in frustration (see fig. 29). Thus, the story is propelled and ended by

Fig. 29 Gaiman *Dream Country* 31

the grotesque actions of these men.

The next story, "A Dream of a Thousand Cats," reveals how a specific type of drawing can create a grotesque feel. For example, in the opening panel there is the mere shadow of a man looming over a little kitten, but the way he is drawn in thick, shadowy lines makes him appear grotesque, huge, and monstrous (see fig. 30). A close up image of a cat (see fig. 31) looks

Fig. 30 Gaiman *Dream Country* 37

Fig. 31 *Dream Country* 42

grotesque because of the heavy shading and large blocks of black to represent shadow. Her face is ancient looking, and the light gray field around it creates an unreal feeling. The graveyard looks more than ominous, with the head peeping out of the ivy and the broken angel's distorted face (see fig. 32). These distortions not only show what the cats are dreaming of or how they see the world – they also force the reader to see this story in a certain light. Instead of a mere fanciful tale where cats are the rulers of the world, there is a nightmare where cats have power, anger, and might as seen in the gleaming eyes of one of the cats listening (see fig. 33). Ultimately, all of these disturbing images work to ready the reader to see the cats munching on humans as snacks

Fig. 32 Gaiman *Dream Country* 40

Fig. 33 Gaiman *Dream Country* 44

when the cat describes her dream. In this story, the way the figures are drawn, with impersonal humans to very humanized cats, depicted by thick black lines and heavy ink shading, shows how the grotesque influences what is going on in the story.

After this cat story, one of *Sandman*'s most popular pieces appears: "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The charm of this story is what helps its popularity, as it follows a travelling troupe of actors, whose playwright is William Shakespeare. However, the grotesque is a vital part of this story as it appears in the true reality and how the faerie realm comments upon, and changes the understanding, of the Elizabethan world, rather like how the comic grotesque is constantly doing to the story. Indeed, this short story is focused on the story that Shakespeare has written and the real people whom the story is about because the audience the troupe is preforming to are the very fairies that are named in the play (see fig. 34). As the play is

Fig. 34 Gaiman *Dream Country* 67

presented, it becomes clear that the grotesque is not what is on stage so much as what is off, especially in the character of Puck (see fig. 35) and Peaseblossom who is spindly and not human

Fig. 35 Gaiman *Dream Country* 72

(see fig. 36). All of the creatures of the Fay are grotesque, especially the half-man / half-donkey,

Fig. 36 Gaiman *Dream Country* 76

and they are what lead this story to its final, creepy ending speech by Puck (see fig. 37). The

Fig. 37 Gaiman *Dream Country* 85

grotesque smile is what leads the viewer in knowing that Puck will return because he is merely repeating the ending soliloquy of Puck's from Shakespeare's play. Thus, Gaiman was able to use the comic grotesque, especially personified in the character of Puck, in order to elevate comics'

literariness. Drawing on the inherent reconciliation of two opposites provides the literary quality of the comic.

The last story in this volume is "Façade," which is dominated by the grotesque nature of the main character. She used to be human, and her house is littered with faces she grew herself (see fig. 38). Both of these elements are grotesque. She is a woman but completely not; she looks

Fig. 38 Gaiman *Dream Country* 91

like a corpse, but can look human if she needs to, if only for a short time (see fig. 39), but

Fig. 39 Gaiman *Dream Country* 97

looking is all she able to do because the rest of her body gives her away. Soon, her face does fall off, into her spaghetti no less, forcing her to flee the restaurant in terror (see fig. 40) because she

Fig. 40 Gaiman *Dream Country* 99

knows that her friend, along with the rest of the people present, will not be able to react well. It is her completely grotesque nature that leads her to this end, and what drives the story to the final conclusion of her allowing herself to be turned to stone by the sun. Ultimately, the grotesque is used in each of these stories to direct and control how the story ends, which reveals the power the grotesque exercises in comics as it becomes the element that best reveals the literariness that might otherwise lay dormant in comics.

Seasons of Mist

The grotesque elements in this section of *Sandman* are dominated by the images provided in Hell. With the overt brining in of Christian tradition, with Hell and Lucifer, the grotesque's relation to Christianity become obvious. Part of the grotesque's deepest power is how it is able to teach humans and show us who we are or are not. With the grotesque, we are able to see how sin distorts who we are supposed to be. In this way, we are human *and* other. We are repulsive even as we hold beauty, just like what Hell represents as the dark mirror of heaven. They are presented early and are what the reader last sees after the story arc is completed. Since it is Hell, many of the grotesque elements are extremely so, not subtle at all. Throughout this whole volume subtlety is lacking, and the overt grotesqueness is allowed to take control, which points back to how *Sandman* embodies a manual of the grotesque. It shows both how the grotesque can be used well and, at times, when it is too heavy handed. These uses of the grotesque show that when it is used well the literariness of comics is enhanced, but when used poorly it detracts away from the story because it pushes the reader in a very particular direction, which is not always good.

To begin, the first page that is a picture of Hell sets up how the whole story shall go (see fig. 41). Dominating this page are pictures of suffering, monsters with mouths at their breast and

Fig. 41 *The Seasons of Mists* 39

no eyes, and flesh being torn as it is bitten apart, which embodies the theme of the story: the life-giving and life-restricting power of the grotesque. These images are clearly not delicate, and

perhaps they should not be, but they do set the tone for the rest of the volume. This is what will dictate the plot that is to come. People pierced by a prong and carried around by monsters, but even on this page there is the grotesque of the more gentle nature. Lucifer, here still pictured as an angel, is in human form with wings growing out of his back, still grotesque, but less unpleasant than the other creatures who inhabit Hell. Later on though, when Lucifer is pictured again, his wings look less angelic and more batlike (see fig. 42). Like Dream being depicted

Fig. 42 Gaiman *Seasons of Mist* 59

differently throughout this volume. He is constantly changing yet remaining constant in spite of the alteration in his portrayal. On this page, once again, the different torments of Hell are pictured grotesquely, piles of bodies, a monster with enormous teeth eating a woman, and the supposed King of Hell yelling to his people. All of this is disturbing, but even more so when Dream finally gets to the realm of Hell and finds it mostly empty. Lucifer is there to lock it up, and gives his assistant a truly revolting kiss (see fig. 43), all of which sets up for Lucifer handing

Fig. 43 Gaiman *Seasons of Mist* 86

the key of Hell over to Dream.

After he does this, Dream must decide what to do with the key, but the elements of the grotesque have already laid the foundation. The feeling that Hell provided now directs the rest of the story into its conclusion. Naturally, many people desire the key to Hell, and, as can be expected, they are all unsavory or grotesque in some way (see fig. 44). Even those who appear

Fig. 44 Gaiman *Seasons of Mist* 148

not to be, such as Cluracan and Nuala from Faerie (see fig. 45) are shown to be grotesque in the

Fig. 45 Gaiman *Seasons of Mist* 208

end as they are not humans, but distortions of humans.

Thus, *Season of Mists* is made up of layered grotesque characters and representations, thick upon thick, to build up to the story's ending where two angels, sent from the Lord, sweep down and take control of Hell. They do so because they say that in order for there to be a Heaven, Hell must be present as it is "Heaven's shadow. They define each other" (Gaiman 176), which again reflects the dual nature of the grotesque and how it is present throughout every aspect of the work. This conclusion works naturally from the entire heavily laid out grotesque. To have ended the story with a grotesque creature gaining control would have been obscene. As a result, the grotesque in *Season of Mists* worked to deliver the only conclusion that would have fit with the story. Indeed, the grotesque provides a solution, reconciling the paradox and reveals itself to be the literariness in the comic. In the same way Coleridge defines the poet, "The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity" (482), the grotesque can be defined to better understand its literariness. This is the action that the grotesque plays in comics because of the visual power that it exerts. Coleridge goes on to say this about poetry versus the poet:

> This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control . . . reveals itself in the balance or *reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities*: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and

> the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (482 emphasis added)

These ideas can also be applied to how the grotesque acts inside the medium of comics. The push and pull aspects that are represented by the dichotomy Coleridge sets up are equally true for the grotesque in comics as seen in Gaiman's *Sandman*, especially when viewing the different representations of the grotesque in *Seasons of Mists* as the different gods and goddess become simultaneously more human and more inhuman.

A Game of You

Finally, *Sandman: A Game of You* is one of the series' most difficult storyline's to process and accept. Many people find this volume to be most offensive, and still more say that this is their least favorite *Sandman* (Bender 117). Interestingly, Bender reports "that *A Game of You* may be [Gaiman's] favorite story in the series" (118). Much of what goes on in *A Game of You* is offensive or hard to accept because of the elements of the grotesque that are so clear. In fact, Gaiman says that he selected the artist for this story, Shawn McManus, because he knew he "could draw both cute fantasy and realistic horror, and mix them seamlessly" (qtd. in Bender 119), which was needed for *A Game of You*, and horror has long been connected to the grotesque, which was most assuredly a large part of this tale.

This particular tale is best served by breaking it up into characters. Gaiman claims that this is his favorite because of the people in it, and they are the dominate aspect of this story. Each of the characters, from Foxglove to Hazel, do present themselves in some way as grotesque, but three do it habitually. And, within their embodiment of the grotesque, they lead and direct the story from the others. Barbie is certainly not in control as she allows herself to be hypnotized by

her doppelgänger, and while Morpheus is at the backbone of all things in the Dreaming, the real actors and pushers of this story are dominatingly grotesque.

To begin, the first character who gives himself away as deeply grotesque is Barbie's downstairs neighbor George. The first time he is presented to the reader, his prickly demeanor and scowl is revealed to be almost monster like (see fig. 46). However, he soon passes from the

Fig.46 Gaiman *A Game of You* 24

reader's mind, until he is shown creepily awaiting news on Barbie and then is revealed to be completely other. The human the reader assumed he was is questioned when he swallows a bird whole. Even as disturbing and unsettling as that image is, the distorted image of his face that appears after contemplating a poster-size picture of Barbie that he has on his wall is even more disconcerting (see fig. 47). However, George tops himself even more so when he takes a knife,

Fig. 47 Gaiman *A Game of You* 40

cuts open his own chest cavity and releases the same bird, and a few more "brothers" (Gaiman 53), that he was seen swallowing earlier (see fig. 48). Ultimately, George is the actor who pushes

Fig. 48 Gaiman *A Game of You* 53

everyone into motion as he attempts to send evil dreams to each of the residents in the apartment building, so the grotesque aspect of George is what allows the story to really begin.

However, what keeps the story in motion is the inherently grotesque cuckoo. She is the one whom Barbie and her friends are questing against, she is the one who has apparently wronged everyone, and she is the one who pretends to have control over the land in which Barbie departs to dream. Since she is such an integral part of the story, it is no surprise that she is grotesque. Interestingly, as she is first presented what makes her grotesque is hidden from the viewer, and it is merely her actions that are shown to be grotesque, like murdering Wilkinson (see fig. 49) and possessing the dead body of Prinado (see fig. 50). Near the conclusion of *A*

Fig. 49 Gaiman *A Game of You* 116

Fig. 50 Gaiman *A Game of You* 110

Game of You, the cuckoo's real image is shown (see fig. 51). This image is what the grotesque is

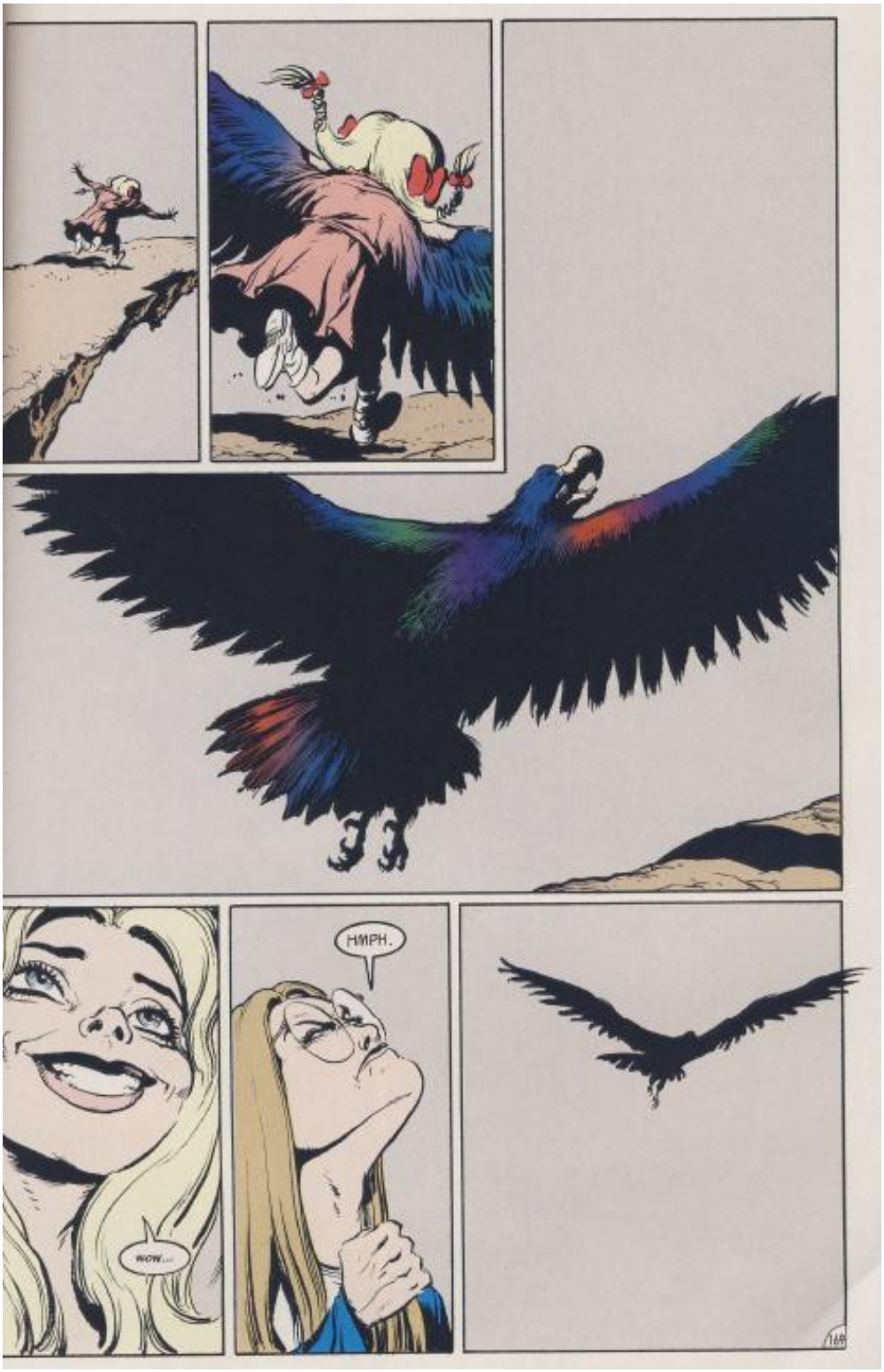

Fig. 51 Gaiman *A Game of You* 169

most commonly defined as, half-human / half-creature because this combination is the closest thing to what frightens us the most about the grotesque – the aspect that is most like ourselves that we simply cannot admit to be real. Thus, once again, the comic grotesque is vital because it is presented in the comic form. The image is what is forever present and will not allow the reader to move past the grotesque representation of the character.

Even so, the grotesque elements that drive this story are never more clearly personified than in the character of Thessaly, who comes back later in the last part of *Sandman* sporting a much more subtle persona of a grotesque witch. Thessaly is not in herself grotesque, looking like a normal, if bookish, college student (see fig. 52), but it is her powers that appear grotesque.

Fig. 52 Gaiman *A Game of You* 22

Her powers are what provide much of the driving force in the story, and her powers are typically linked to the grotesque elements. These are first exhibited when she murders and burns the bird that was sent to give her a bad dream (see fig. 53). Next, they are seen when she kills George,

Fig. 53 Gaiman *A Game of You* 61

skins him, nails his head to the wall, and gives a gruesome kiss of life where she rips out his tongue (see fig. 54). This is the point at which her grotesque nature shows up on her physical

Fig. 54 Gaiman *A Game of You* 81

person as blood drips down her mouth, chin, and throat. Her next power does not seem as grotesque, especially as it is bathed in the moon's gentle glow, but the menstruation blood that is required immediately links it with the grotesque because it illuminates that aspect of woman that makes her wholly other to her counterpart in humanity. The last act of grotesque power that Thessaly exhibits is when they – Thessaly, Foxglove, and Hazel – find Wilkinson and she forces his blood to talk to her by adding a few drop of her own (see fig. 55). All of the blood that

Fig. 55 Gaiman *A Game of You* 133

Thessaly uses and manipulates reveals the truly disturbing nature of her character because it not natural and is against her human aspect, which is what makes her fundamentally grotesque. This aspect once again shows Gaiman in danger of disturbing the balance of the grotesque. Everything that Thessaly ends up doing does further the plot and direct it to where it is going. However, it is clearly aggressive and over the top in many instances, which reveals how heavily Gaiman draws upon the grotesque in this portion of his epic.

An oddly grotesque character in *A Game of You* that is another reason for the pull and movement of the story is the pre-op transvestite Wanda. She is by her very nature grotesque as a male/female combined, but more in the way an angel is grotesque. She is changing who she is, altering herself, which is why she often looks odd and out of place. Usually, this is because her manliness simply cannot help but come through (see fig. 56). In fact, it is not until the touching,

Fig. 56 Gaiman *A Game of You* 92

poignant ending where Barbie sees Wanda with death that she finally looks like herself (see fig. 57). The way Wanda's grotesqueness controls the story is more subtle and foreshadows the

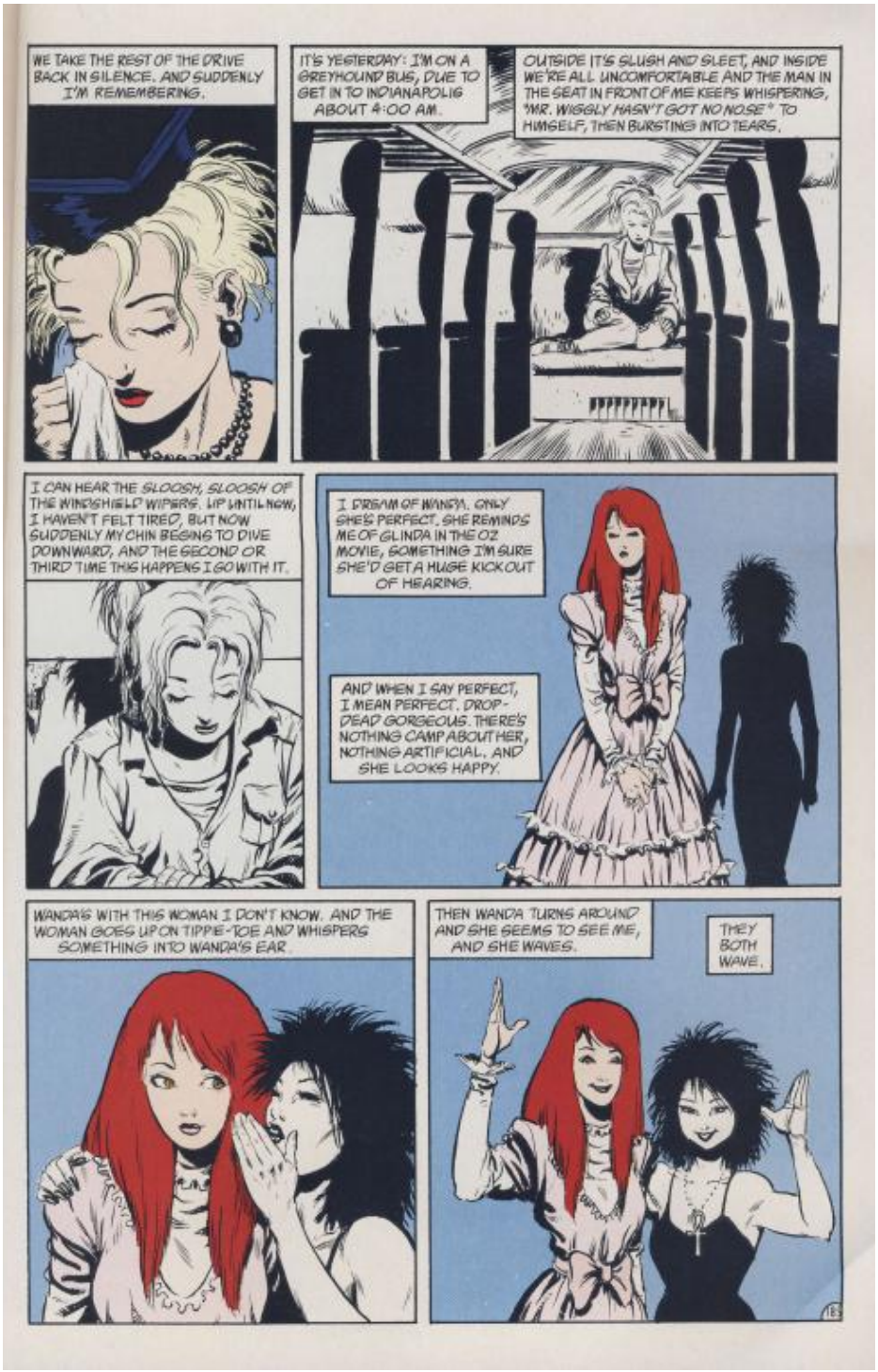

Fig. 57 Gaiman *A Game of You* 185

changing aspects that will come into more play in the last five books of *Sandman*.

Thus, it is clear that *Sandman* relies heavily on the grotesque for not only its atmosphere, tone, and feeling but for most of the story itself. *Sandman* has been called a story about stories, and anyone who is at all familiar with Gaiman's work knows that he considers the story to be paramount even as he plays with the postmodern elements of author and reader. Chris Dowd mentions that "[b]y committing the story to paper he [Gaiman] attempts to achieve communion with an audience and acknowledges that storytelling itself is an imaginative project that requires an intimate union between author and audience. Without the audience, a storyteller's mirror has nothing to reflect" (114). Indeed, this would be horrifying for Gaiman because he delights in showing his reader himself. Later Dowd goes on to say about Gaiman, "When he pulls us in to look at the carcass of a story, he is able to show us how each of us built our own dreams" (114). This description of Gaiman's work incorporates the two elements that are always found in each of his stories, quite literally, one being that of story and the other that of the grotesque, which is often what elevates comics to a literariness with its use. Even the wording, such as "carcass," that Dowd chooses links itself to the grotesque. All of this to say, the grotesque is an integral part of *Sandman* and cannot be separated from the story without the tale completely falling apart. However, much of what is presented within these first five volumes of *Sandman* is aggressive and overt, especially in terms of the grotesque.

Chapter Four

Subtlety's Takeover: The Grotesque in the Last Five Books of *Sandman*

The grotesque elements within the last five volumes of *Sandman*, get less overt and become more subtle, displaying the exhaustive nature of *Sandman* as a manual for the different ways the comic grotesque can be used. The transformation into a more subtle grotesque is partly because of Gaiman's growth as an artist, partly because of the direction the story takes and partly because of the directions comics as a whole has taken. Over the course of the late eighties and early nineties, comics were becoming more subtle, and the artistry in them was often greater. Comics, as a whole, were showing more literariness than they had in the past. The direction changed because after such an overtly grotesque volume as *A Game of You*, Gaiman began to push his story very clearly in the direction the whole series was to take. Mila Bongco discusses the transformation that came over comics because of Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*: "The biggest change was the way Moore portrayed horror – instead of alarming the readers with superficial sensationalism, the dread now came from sensing that horror lies in the core of man's inner self or psyche" (182). Gaiman, too, followed Moore's lead, who was actually the author who "taught" Gaiman how to write comics by showing him how he scripted his. This portrayal of horror, when applied to the last half of the *Sandman* saga helps illuminate the change that Gaiman made in his approach to the elements of the grotesque. Instead of using the more overt sensationalism of the first five volumes, Gaiman began to use a much more subtle approach. This change proved quite important to Gaiman's work with *Sandman* because he was able to take it into a more eloquent and poignant story. Indeed, over the course of the final five volumes, Dream is questioning himself, who he is, and how much he can change before he is no longer

himself, all of which are questions that are best illuminated under the light of the grotesque, which highlights aspects that might be otherwise missed.

Sandman's story is poignant and especially relevant to today's culture. It capitalizes on, mocks, mimics, and reveals much of what people are searching and looking for in the postmodern world. Thom Parham mentions that

> The entire *Sandman* series [as seen in *Preludes and Nocturnes* when the modern man seeks to trap Dream in an effort to escape death, the life-weary traveling companions in *Worlds' End*, and the constant presence of the weakened divinities who wander the world having lost the worship they once held dear in *Seasons of Mist*], then, affirms postmodern humanity's search for transcendence through the mystical, the divine, or even the occult. (205)

This aspect of *Sandman* is key because it shows how important *Sandman* is to the culture and how people have a deep need for the mystical. The mysticism and divine search is reflected in the grotesque, which tends to be linked with mysticism. For example, most of the grotesque in *Sandman* is presented to the reader through the Fay or Hell or Dreamland. The most typical aspect of the grotesque is half-man, half-creature, which is always mystical or divine. This feature of the grotesque embodies the very essence of the grotesque in the balance of the other and the self – what is easy to accept versus what seems foreign. Once again, this points to how the grotesque reflects the fallen state of man. Our spiritual side, what is mystical in all humans, is just like the grotesque: being both appealing and horrifying, as we are all capable of great kindness and love as well as deep cruelty and hate.

Fables and Reflections

Fables and Reflections is a volume of *Sandman* that is separated by story as *Dream Country* was. Each story is forced to its conclusion by the grotesque but in a subtler manner than what had been previously used. The glaring grotesque seen in "24 Hours" and *A Game of You* is toned down in these stories, drawing on the more subconscious grotesque that might be seen in the bug-eyes of Peter Lorre compared to the overtly inhuman eyes of the Fly. For example, the beginning story, more of a prologue to *Fables and Reflections,* is grotesque in the way it is drawn rather than an overt grotesque as occurred in *Preludes and Nocturnes* when a room was literally someone's body. Sandman looks like a monster or a demon because of the lines that are used to depict him (see fig. 58). The dominating figure of the Sandman in this short story

Fig. 58 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections*

reflects how the grotesque is more subtle and dictates the rest of the story who is the only reflection of the grotesque in an equally quiet, yet powerful, way. Even after the reader has moved past Todd's dream and back into reality, he still remembers the vision of Dream.

The next story, "Three Septembers and a January," presents an interesting aspect of the grotesque. In this story, the truly disturbing grotesque is present as well as the dream and the sweeter grotesque. In fact, it is sort of a fight between the two inside one man, which is provides an encapsulation of the larger conflict of the story between the transformation that takes place within Dream and how he used to be, especially when he goes from Morpheus to Daniel at the end of the series. Despair begins it when she challenges her brother. She represents the darker grotesque because of her clear separation from humanity (see fig. 59) while Dream, in this story,

Fig. 59 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 21

represents the sweeter grotesque as he, though still other, is closer to the self of the reader (see fig. 60). As the story progresses, Despair and Desire repeatedly try to squash the sweeter

Fig. 60 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 24

grotesque, but they fail in the end because it is too powerful for them.

The sweeter grotesque, which is often the more subtle, becomes important in the next story as well. “Thermidor” is an interesting story about the head of Orpheus, which naturally is grotesque since it is focused on the living head of a human separated from his body. The head

dominates any page that it is on because of the pallor of his skin and how it shows up so strongly against the background (see fig. 61). Even when Johanna is putting the head back in the sack, it

Fig. 61 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 49

is hard not to focus on it because it is such a foreign thing. Once again in this story the sweeter versus the more aggressive grotesque is present. When Orpheus' head is merely grabbed by the hair and held up, it is more aggressively grotesque (see fig. 62) because it looks quite like a dead

Fig. 63 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 50

head with skin hanging off the edges. However, when Johanna gives him back to the priests who take care of him and they hold him with reverence (see fig. 63), he does not cease to be

Fig. 63 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 70

grotesque, but it is gentler. All of this material is evidence of Gaiman's manipulation of the grotesque, taking his readers through the crucible of the contradictory forces, expressing the macro level of the story in the micro.

"The Hunt" is also effectively about the grotesque. The young man in the story is a werewolf, which means he is a half-man, half-wolf creature, making him grotesque both in appearance (the way he is drawn to show his otherness achieved by indistinct lines), and in identity. However, when he is first drawn that is unclear, and not until the old woman looks into his eye is it hinted that he is a monster (see fig. 64). Yet, even as he kills a treacherous innkeeper,

Fig. 64 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 78

he soon does not appear to be the monster with the introduction to Baba Yaga, the Russian witch whose house is carried on the legs of chickens and who appears grotesque and monstrous (see fig. 65). She dominates the page with her obese body and disturbing grin, which taints the

Fig. 65 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 87

journey that the young man is on, foreshadowing its ill ending. What this shows in this single tale is that the grotesque is what pushes the story in its comic form into a mature tale. The grotesque represents the self, the other found in every human. This story provides a subtler grotesque compared to Gaiman's earlier work in the series because the grotesque is revealed through the lines and content elements rather than over-the-top representations of blood and gore of the previous volumes.

The next story, "August," presents the grotesque as a useful tool to mask oneself from the gods. In this tale, Caesar Augustus receives a dwarf in his palace who shows him how to make his skin look mutilated and covered with sores (see fig. 66). Together they spend the day

Fig. 66 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 102

begging, but what Caesar is really doing is planning his strategy without having the gods look into his thoughts because they do not notice the thoughts of a mere beggar. The elements of the grotesque, especially as they are smeared over their bodies, are present throughout the whole story. In fact, they give the story its power and drive, which is key because this grotesque – a false grotesque when simply smeared on – reveals another paradox that can be drawn on in the comic grotesque: the paradox of the emperor being more other than the dwarf.

The grotesque present in "Soft Places" is brought to life in how it is drawn, revealing a softer grotesque, which is appropriate considering the title of the story. Much of the grotesque elements in this story have to do with a wandering group of specters (see fig. 67). This image is

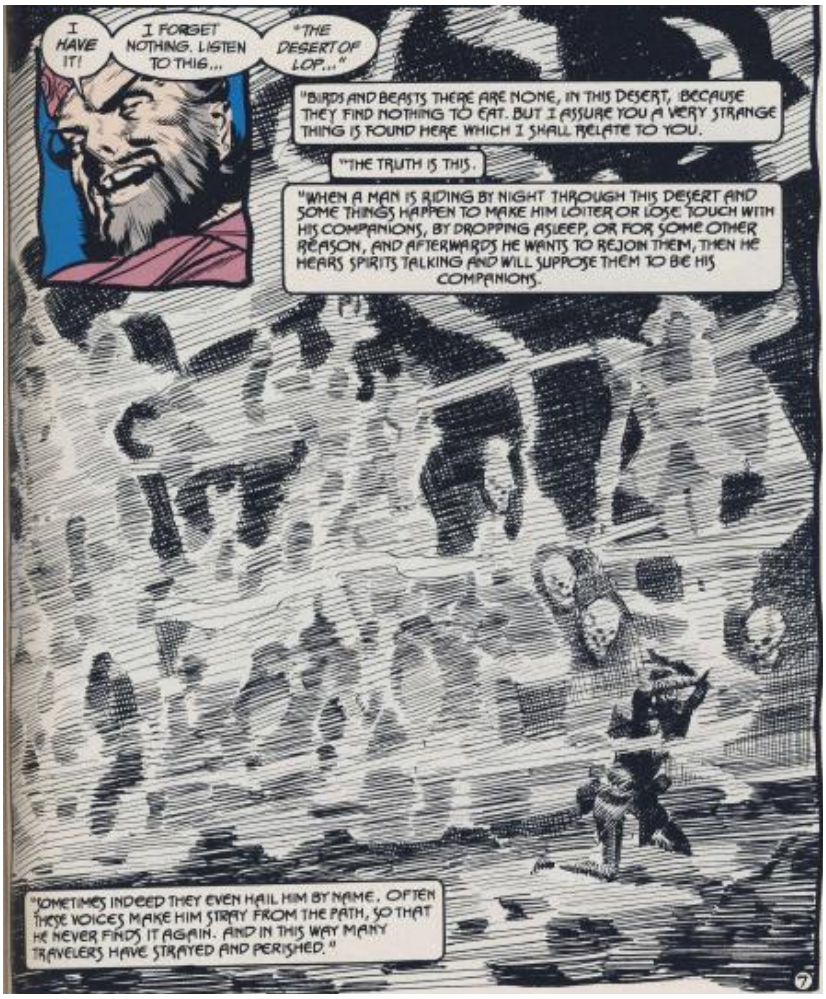

Fig. 67 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 131

how they appear when they are just beyond sight, with heads as skulls and as if the phantoms would eat any weary traveler. However, when the little band in the desert do meet them they are still grotesque as they are phantoms and do not have real bodies, but they are softer than the assumed group (see fig. 68). The difference is accomplished in the way the two scenes are drawn

Fig. 68 Gaiman *Fables and Reflection* 139

and inked. One uses open flowing lines that appear to almost be sketching with a pen while the other one makes heavy use of dark crosshatching. The distinction follows the story through to its conclusion as the difference between what is and what could be is capitalized on in the story. This aspect shows yet another power of the grotesque and also reveals how it can be used to clearly reveal the literariness in comics.

The next story, "The Song of Orpheus," is notably longer than any of the other in the collection and it focuses on Sandman's son Orpheus. At the beginning of the story the epitome of the grotesque is present and it is he who controls the first story: a faun (see fig. 69). He is the

Fig. 69 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 157

one who seems to dictate the merry mood of the wedding and also the one whose insatiable lust causes Eurydice to die. However, even as he is the one who controls the beginning of the context, he – the embodiment of the grotesque – is also the one who that controls the rest. This story is drawn in a harsh way, making heavy use of intricate details in the blackness (see fig. 70).

Fig. 70 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 179

This style makes the cavern look like a grotesque place with monsters lurking. The dead people who swarm around Orpheus as he comes to see Eurydice[9] (see fig. 71) and the spectators who

Fig. 71 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 181

hear Orpheus sing (see fig. 72) foreshadow what will happen to Eurydice at the end of his story.

[9] Indeed, Gaiman, by connecting to classic literature, shows how man has always been the same: in a state of grotesqueness.

Fig. 72 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 184

The second to last story in *Fables and Reflections* is "The Parliament of the Rooks," and it actually consists of several stories, which provides more room for the grotesque to reveal itself.

However, the telling takes place at Cain and Abel's house, and it is their grotesque relationship that pulls the story to its conclusion. Cain is constantly and consistently killing Abel (see fig. 73).

Fig. 73 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 223

This tension is present even as the other stories are told. In one the actual action is present (see fig. 74) and in another the action with different characters is present (see fig. 75). It is this

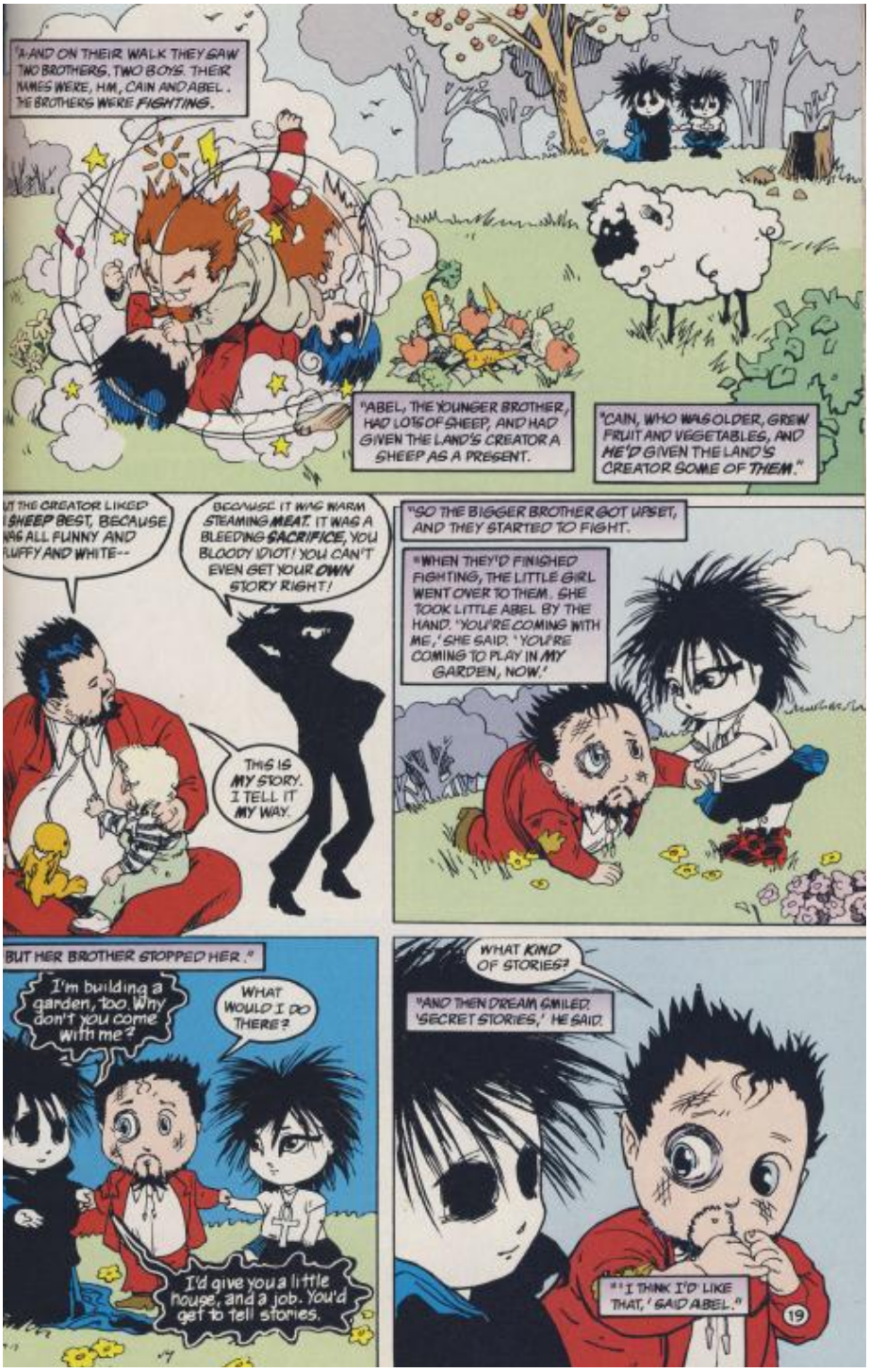

Fig. 74 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 219

Fig. 75 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 212

tension and ever present occurrence that keeps the story moving forward, so the grotesque is what gives the story a reason for existing and what gives the comic a literary aspect, all while

Gaiman is explaining the different methods of use it presents. This literary aspect is brought out by the grotesque as it elevates the story and helps bring more mature readers to the story.

Finally, in one of the most beloved stories in *Sandman*, "Ramadan," there is an interesting dichotomy between the grotesque in fantasy compared to the grotesque in reality. The city of Bagdad is set up as the place where this story is realized. In fantasy the grotesque is appealing and welcoming to man (see fig. 76), but in reality the grotesque is pathetic and sad

Fig. 76 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 251

(see fig. 77). The two set up a constant pull between the different manifestations of the grotesque

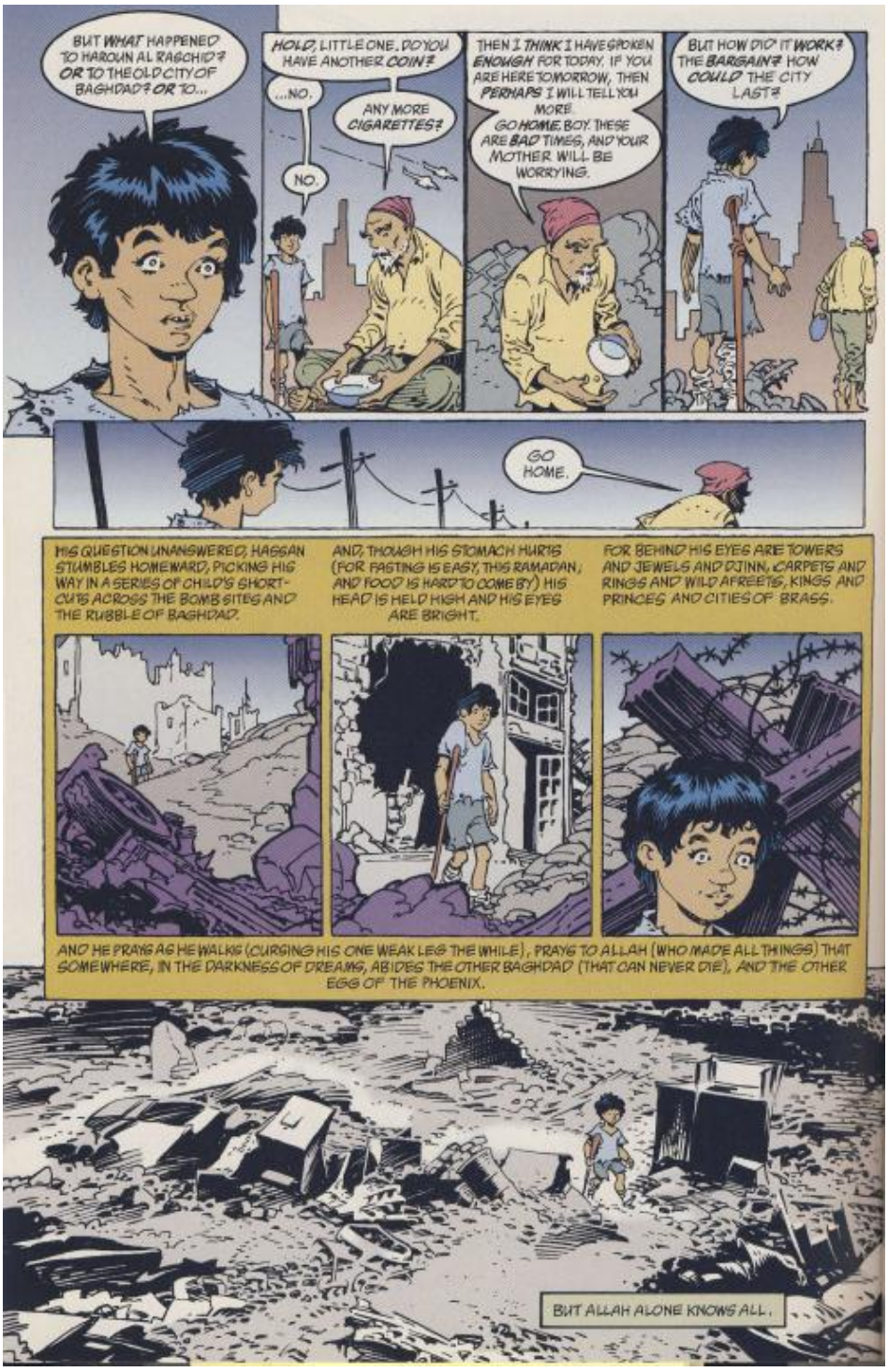

Fig. 77 Gaiman *Fables and Reflections* 258

in *Sandman* that appears throughout the rest of the series. Thus, right here in this story, the grotesque provides the reason for it to exist; without the grotesque, the story would be flaccid and pointless, but with it the connection to literariness is clear and reveals why comics have the ability and prerogative to be elevated past the adolescent readership. When authors, such as Gaiman, do manipulate and control the grotesque, it shows that their story is beyond mere pop fiction.

Brief Lives

Brief Lives picks up the tale in full force, while *Fables and Reflections* had been mere snapshots of what was occurring revealed in short stories. *Brief Lives* begins with where Orpheus is now – a head on a table (see fig. 78). As mentioned before, the very nature of Orpheus' state is

Fig. 78 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 4

grotesque, and once again it will shape and direct this story arc. He will be what drives *Brief Lives*, and his ending will be what shows best how the grotesque in this section reflects a more subtle grotesque that is present through this whole volume. The subtle grotesque is more important than the overt grotesque because it displays Gaiman's developing use of the different elements and representations of the grotesque in order to reinterpret comics as a literary medium.

As the head is what begins this volume, it is important to note that the power the grotesque exerts lasts beyond the reading of the volume. Even though the head may have been shown several pages previous, the image of just the face of Orpheus may come back to the reader and impact what they are reading at that time. This reminiscent could be true of any number of grotesque images that appear throughout *Brief Lives* and indeed any other comic. For example, the dissected body of the Oran Oatan (see fig. 79) might come to mind several pages later when

Fig. 79 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 19

Ruby burns to death and the firemen are shown carrying her body (see fig. 80). The grotesque's

Fig. 80 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 23

staying power means that it later influences other parts of the story. If a picture is set up with the same composition as a previous one, then they might reflect one another. This facet is the constancy that counterbalances Gaiman's manipulation of the grotesque elements. This aspect of the comic grotesque is especially powerful because it shows the overwhelming impact grotesque images hold in transforming a text into something new. They tend to stay in the mind long after they have been seen, which means they can often comment on a picture that seems to be without grotesque elements. This power is in part what makes the grotesque immediately elevate the text

used. It develops and deepens the story by constantly adding a subtext that enriches what is occurring. Thus, Gaiman uses different grotesque elements to accomplish his story's end.

Near the end of *Brief Lives*, Dream has to finally kill his son Orpheus in order to allow him to have release, peace, and rest. He does so with a heavy heart, but knows it must be accomplished. As a result, Dream has to take the head of his son and kill it, which would normally be an overtly grotesque scene. However, in this part of the story, the death is not actually shown. The shadow of Dream holding his son's head and the head dead are shown (see fig. 81), which makes the

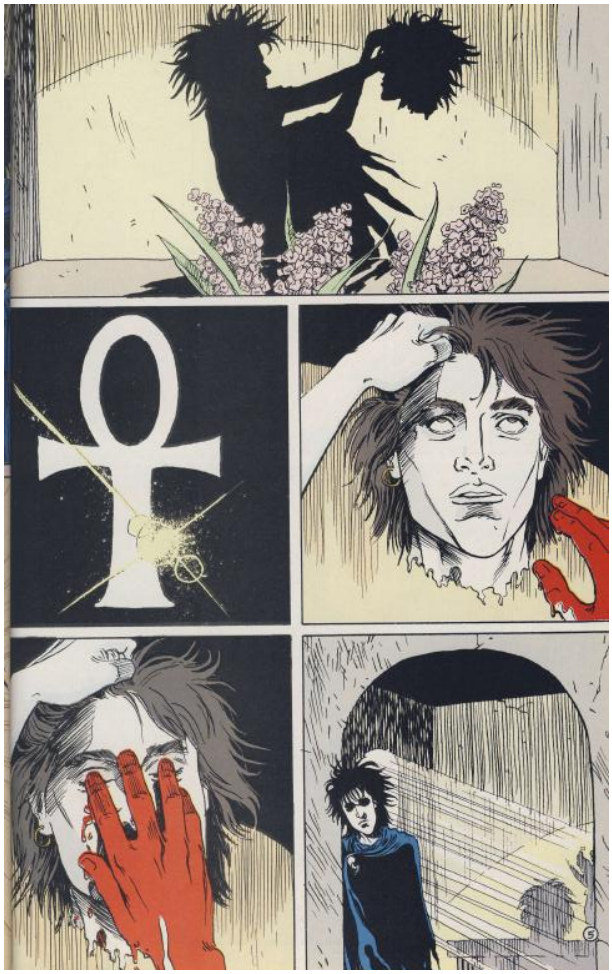

Fig. 81 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 5

death sweeter and not as aggressive. This fact shows the power of the grotesque in a reader. If a truly bloody death had been shown, it would force the reader to focus on that rather than the

poignant moment that is occurring. The way that it is shown highlights a sweeter grotesque that allows the reader to fully comprehend the sadness in the death rather than the violence. Right after Dream has killed his son and closed his lifeless eyes, he slumps out of the building. The blood falls off his hands and, as it touches the earth, is transformed into flowers (see fig. 82).

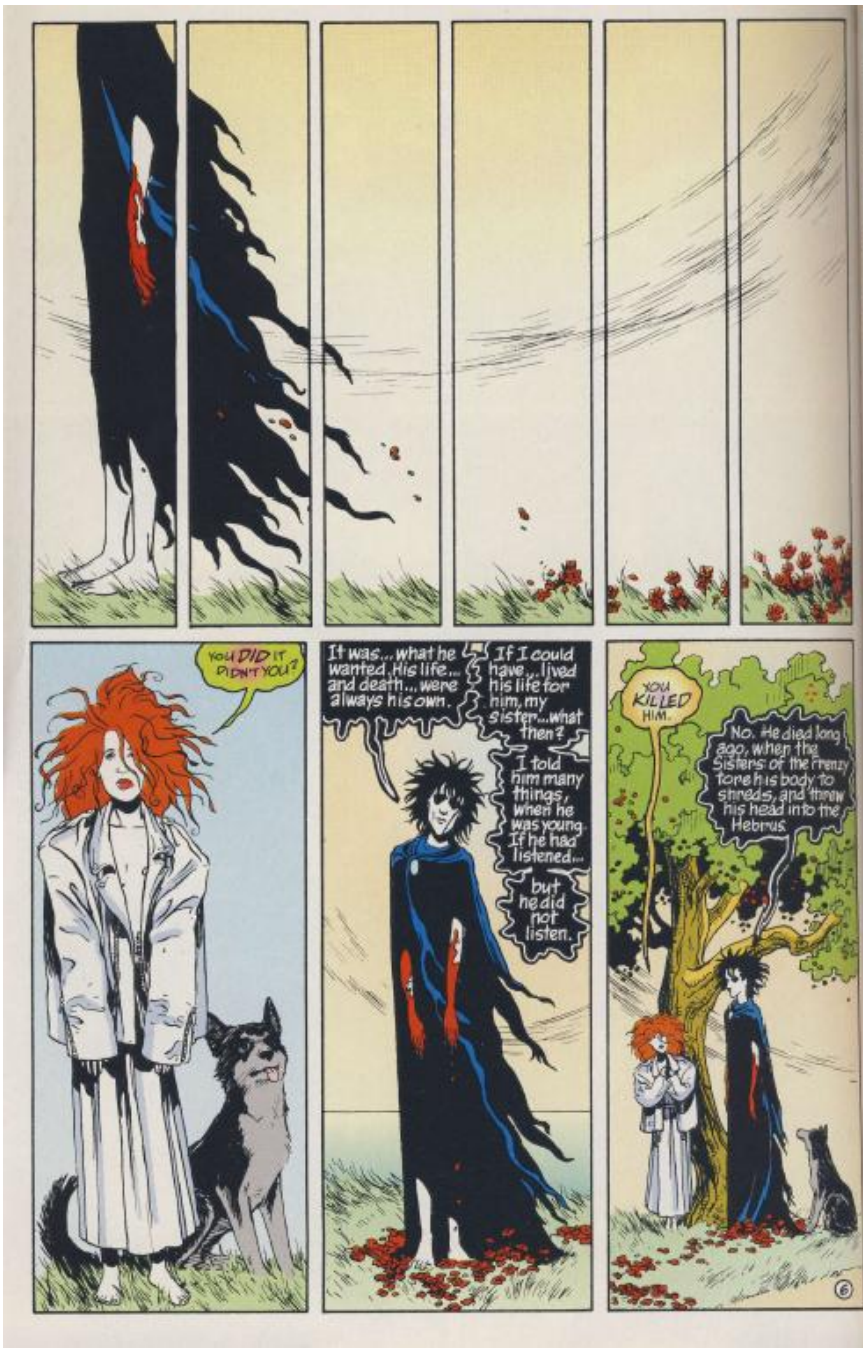

Fig. 82 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 6

Once again this scene is an instance of the sweeter grotesque, but one that is still powerful and lingers in the mind of the reader, especially as Desire later holds the flower in her hand (see fig. 83). This lingering nature is important because it links the flower with the blood of Orpheus.

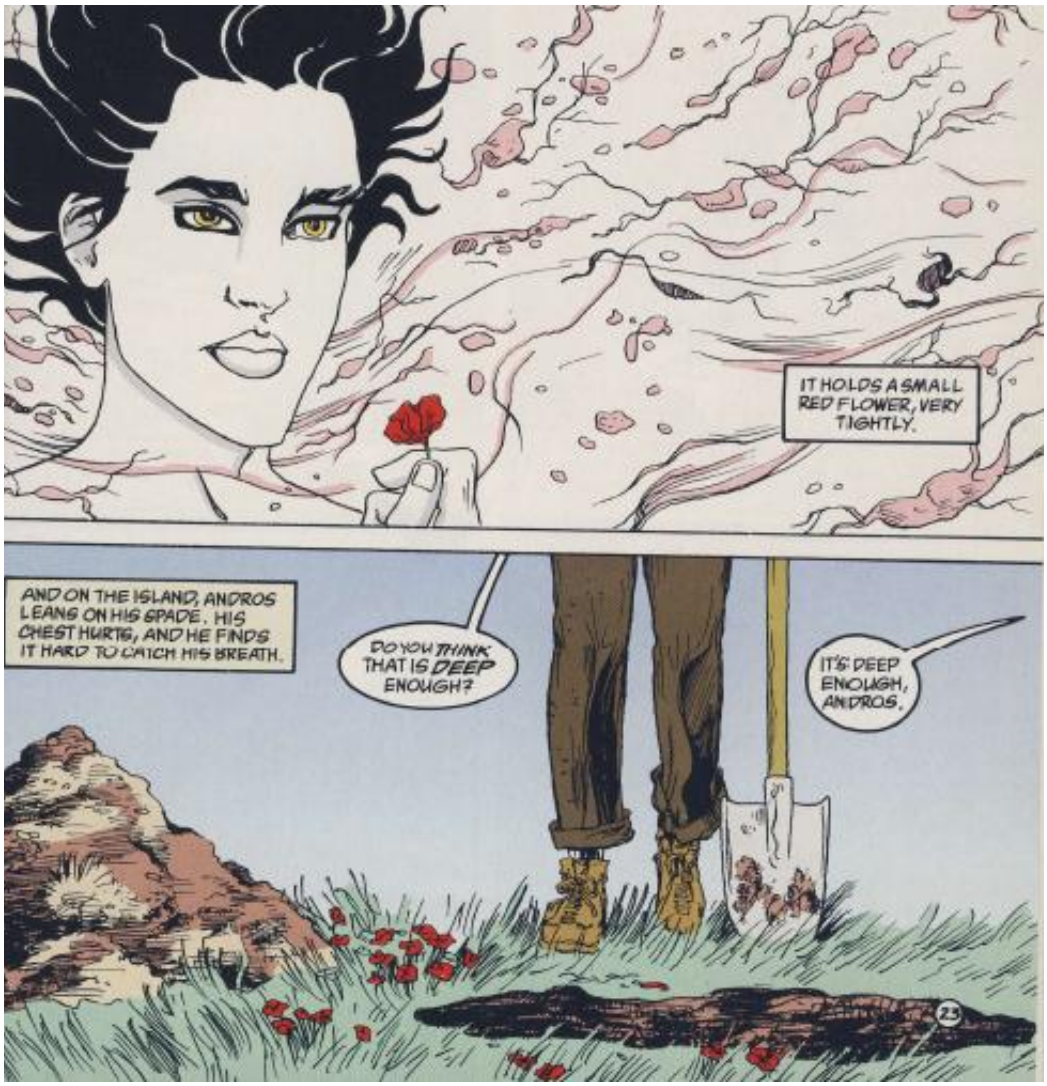

Fig. 83 Gaiman *Brief Lives* 207

When the viewer sees the flower, he cannot help but also see Orpheus' dead face, showing that the grotesque has staying power, which also goes back to the lasting nature of images in comics in general, which is partly what gives the grotesque so much more power in comics than in prose.

Worlds' End

Worlds' End is another volume that is a compilation of short stories and shows how the grotesque may be used in many distinct ways. However, this one is all connected together. Instead of one story following another, this section reflects Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. A great number of people are held up at an inn, and they seek to pass the time until they can travel again by telling stories to one another. The disruptive weather has caused time to be confused, which means that people from any time and any world are present. This situation leads to many interesting, diverting tales being told. However, even though they represent unique cultures and lives, each of the tales is propelled by the grotesque working inside of it, a further hearkening and example of the literariness of the grotesque.

Even the frame story that supports all the short stories inside of it is rife with the grotesque. The readers know something unusual is happening because they are shown a grotesque horned creature (see fig. 84). Later, when the two humans arrive at the inn, they are

Fig. 84 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 19

helped by a centaur (see fig. 85), who is by his very nature grotesque being half-man and half

Fig. 85 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 24

-beast. These are the creatures that populate the inn and begin telling stories. The first story that is told is grotesque in the manner that it is drawn. It looks like what woodcuts turn out to be, with large blocks of black, which give the story an ominous tone (see fig. 86). The figures often

Fig. 86 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 27

appear monstrous, ghoulish and grotesque because of this technique, which dominates the entire story. Thus, in this story, the grotesque's overarching power is displayed in comics; it controls tone as well as the direction of the story.

The next tale is Cluracan's. His story is dominated by the grotesque figure of the Psychopomp (see fig. 87), who is a notably obese man covered in red sores. His dominance is

Fig. 87 Gaiman *Worlds' End*

important because it reflects the power he holds over the city Cluracan is in, embodying the power the grotesque exerts over the story. In fact, the Psychopomp's ugly appearance reflects the

status of the city, which is being torn apart by poor government. When Cluracan first tells of the city (see fig. 88), it was "one of the greatest cities of the plains. Twelve hundred years ago it had

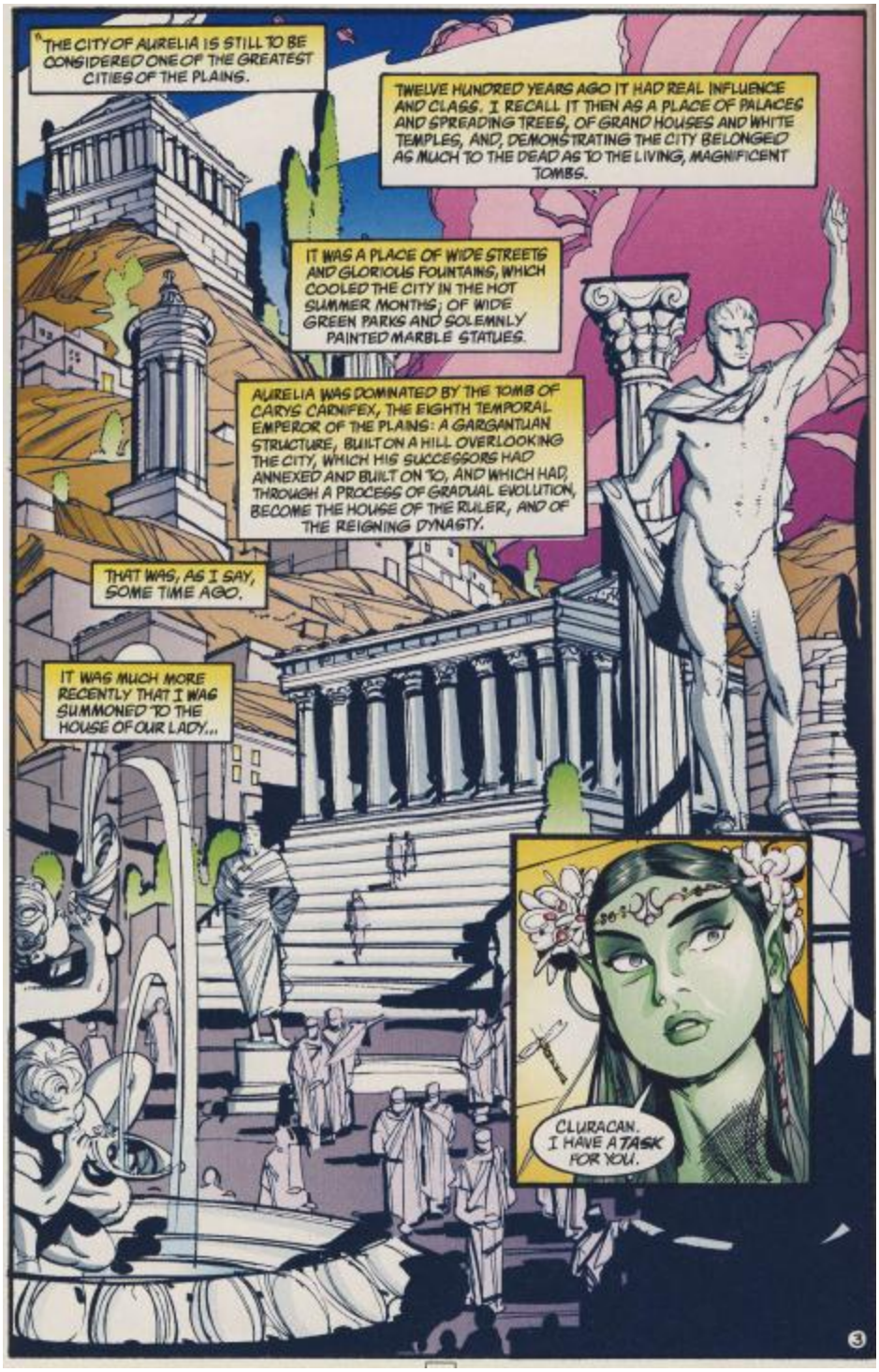

Fig. 88 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 44

real influence and class. I recall it then as a place of palaces and spreading trees, of grand houses and white temples . . . it was a place of wide streets and glorious fountains, which cooled the city in the hot summer months; of wide green parks and solemnly painted marble statues" (Gaiman 44), but when he visits it again (see fig. 89), he says, "Aurelia of the plains was, alas, no longer

Fig. 89 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 47

as I remember it. The roads were thick with filth; here and there a house had collapsed into the street, unrepaired and unremoved" (Gaiman 47). This contrast shows that the grotesque in this story dominates and permeates throughout each happening, even to the city's appearance.

The next story "Hob's Leviathan," as is revealed by the title, focuses on a Leviathan, a grotesque monster. Jim, the tale's teller, reports how she became a sailor. Intricate, grotesque decorative markings signal the beginning of her tale (see fig. 90). However, they are the only

Fig. 90 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 69

grotesque elements for a bit, as the story simply relates sea living in the early nineteen hundreds, but their remembrance lasts, which shows how pivotal the grotesque is in comics. Soon, there is a story told on board the ship that contains a man cutting off his hand and reattaching it among other things, which reflect the grotesque turn the story is going to take. Finally, the real element is revealed (see fig. 91). He dominates the rest of the story by lingering in the reader's mind,

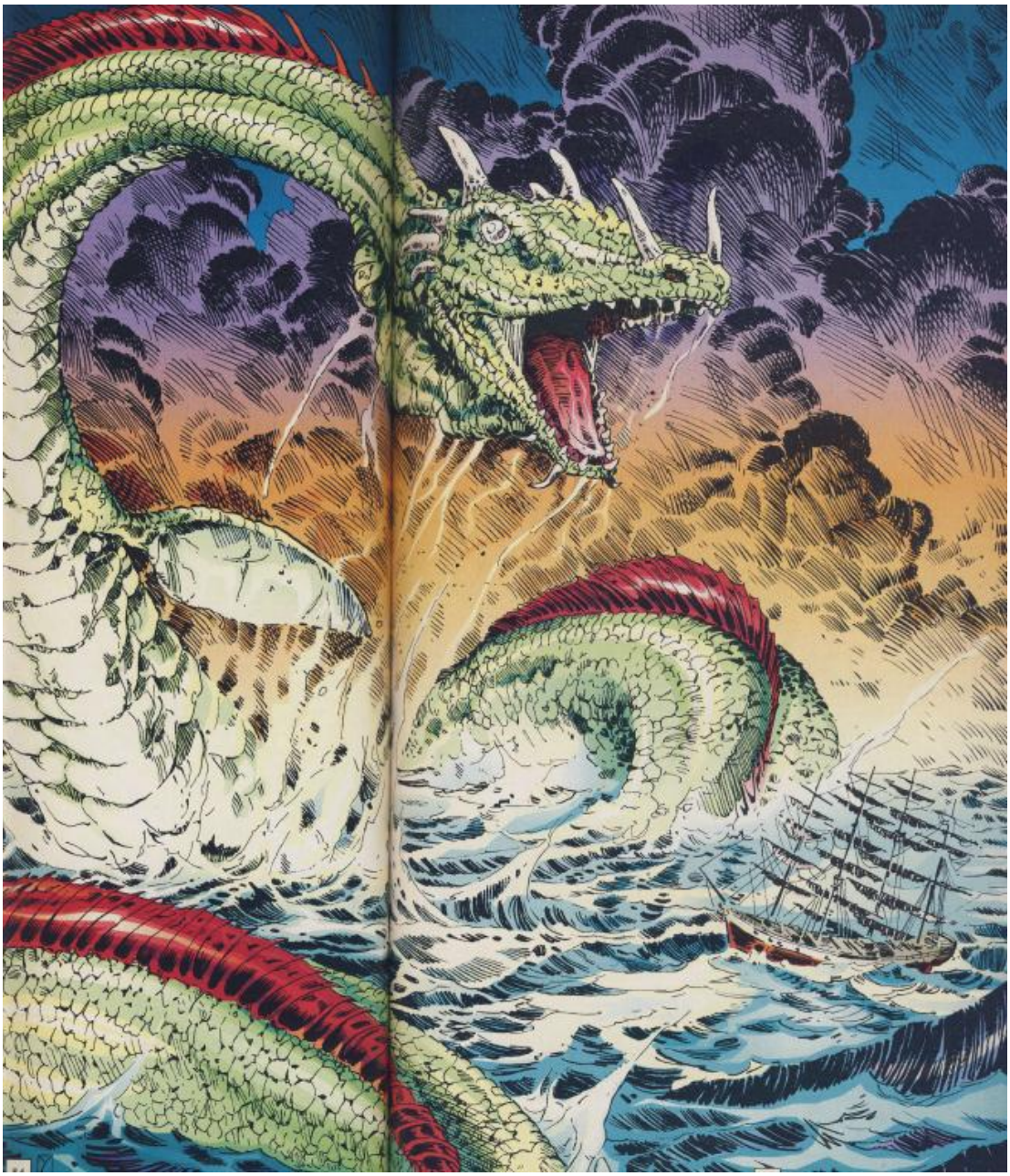

Fig. 91 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 84-85

even as he was only shown twice because that is the power of the grotesque in a visual art. The image lingers on and comes to mind every time Jim brings it up. This image is s a subtler grotesque than early because of its limited appearance. However, the few depictions do not lessen its power because what was presented is what provided the substance of the story. The grotesque is what is controlling, manipulating the reader, and proving comic's literary worth.

"The Golden Boy" is the next story that is told and is dominated by one grotesque figure that gives the story its context and direction. His name is Boss Smiley, and he looks like a man with a smiley face on top of his body (see fig. 92). As the story unfolds, he is linked with the

Fig. 92 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 96

devil, mirroring the scene in the Bible when the devil tempts Jesus with all the power he holds. Thus, he is doubly grotesque: in once sense his physical appearance is so, and in another his ultimate objective is as well. The importance that he holds on the story is paramount: because of him, Prez has someone to fight against, and even when Prez dies, he must pass over the grotesque Boss Smiley to continue helping others. As he is a smiley face, he is perpetually smiling and often depicted as crudely laughing. This image reflects what Kayser mentions about laughter and the grotesque: "The role of laughter within the complex of the grotesque poses the most difficult question that arises in conjunction with that phenomenon . . . and thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD" (187-88). What Kayser mentions is precisely what is occurring in "The Golden Boy," which reveals the grotesque's power at connecting the comic with as Gaiman represents a classic trope (the devil attempting to seduce a man in order to take over his soul) developed and used by countless writers in the classic canon, including Goethe and Hoffman.

In the story told by Petrefax, the beautiful aspect of the grotesque that displays the subtlety that Gaiman employs in the last part of *Sandman* is shown. The Necropolis is by its very nature grotesque as the inhabitants not only appear cadaverous (see fig. 93) but they also are

Fig. 93 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 117

solely in charge of one job: to dispose of dead bodies. His story becomes even more grotesque as he describes an air burial (see fig. 94). However, even as this image is unappealing and revolting

Fig. 94 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 121

in many ways, as the vultures or other creatures of the air eat the flesh off the body, it becomes startlingly beautiful as Petrefax relates how a person is not to wash the hands after feeding the birds the dead body because it would be disrespectful (see fig. 95): "Even the air burial, and the

Fig. 95 Gaiman *Worlds' End 123*

notion that after you grind up the deceased you should eat your lunch, because the bits of the corpse on your hands will make the lunch taste better" (Bender 184). This idea makes the grotesque action that is being carried out strangely beautiful. It shows the respect of the dead,

which will always be grotesque because they used to be completely human and now are only shell of what it is to be human. It also shows the connection of the comic grotesque to the grotesque in reality, which makes the comic more appropriate and fitting as a literary text rather than just a cheap work of meaningless popular fiction.

Worlds' End ends with the frame story culminating in the full unleashing of the storm that had brewed outside. Mainly, this ending acts as a foreshadowing to coming events in the lives of the Endless. All the people at the inn look out the window and see a caravan of people passing, ending with Death as she looks sadly, almost meekly, out at the viewer and with the moon as it is slowly covered by blood (see fig. 96). This image is grotesque in a quiet way as her

Fig. 96 Gaiman *Worlds' End* 157

otherworldliness sets her apart, but still connects her to humanity and the moon's slow transformation into blood red is in the background rather than the foreground. This subtle grotesque ends all of the stories that had been shared at the inn in the same quite way, pointing to the gentle power the grotesque can have on a story, showing once again the paradoxical nature and importance of the grotesque in comics.

The Kindly Ones

The *Kindly Ones* was drawn in a graphic expressionist style (meaning that the artist tried to distill any given image into the simplest lines, attempting to embody the expression of what is at the essence of a thing rather than merely providing a realistic representation), which many readers were displeased with. However, the way it is drawn actually helps the grotesque, and by proxy the story, come through clearer. The artist Marc Hempel says, "My basic approach . . . is to take a person and make him or her into shapes; and then use those shapes to convey emotion" (qtd. in Bender 191) (see fig. 97). This simplicity forces the viewer to focus on exactly what is

Fig. 97 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 65

important, instead of getting lost in complexities or details because it does not provide these. Gaiman mentions that Hempel's style is so distinct from what mainstream comic readers were used to seeing that the difference could be almost painful (qtd. in Bender 191-92). However, this difference was important for this story line because Gaiman wanted the readers to focus in on what he was presenting. This story arc is the longest of the series, and Gaiman did not want his readers to get lost in digressions, which is why the grotesque in this volume in paramount is the delivery of the story.

Also, it works to place the reader more explicitly in the context of what is going on rather than a more realistic approach. There is less distancing between the reader and the characters and the grotesque with this style, which goes back to what McCloud said in *Understanding Comics*: "Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face - - - - you see it as the face of ***another***. But when you enter the world of the ***cartoon*** - - - - you see ***yourself***" (36). This connection is especially important in *The Kindly Ones* because this is the real ending of *Sandman* as the reader knows it. This volume includes Dream's suicide, and though a manifestation of him, Daniel, comes back it is not the same, so in the next volume the reader feels alienated from the story because it is not the Dream he has come to love.

Indeed, this style of art brings out the grotesque in places where they would otherwise not be. For example, when Hempel presents the reader with the simple face of Loki that is made even more grotesque simply by the lines and coloring make him into a kind of monster (see fig. 98). The same thing occurs repeatedly in this volume, as seen in Hempel's representation of Abel (see fig. 99), which makes much of the story in this portion grotesque both in appearance and in actuality. Abel appears to be a monster and just moments later is killed, dying in a pool of his own blood with a baby gargoyle crying for him on his shoulder. Both of these things are

Fig. 98 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 48

Fig. 99 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 215

grotesque, and work to focus the reader's attention on what is occurring in the dream world at this time, which reveals the power of the grotesque as it is what forces the reader to react.

Overall, this volume is dominated by the grotesque from its start, as it begins with picturing the three fates (see fig. 100). These three ladies are grotesque mainly because one of

Fig. 100 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 1

them, the crone, is continually repulsive in her elderly, wart marked way. However, the other two become grotesque because they each become the other, making the crone dominate them. In fact, in the opening scene when the crone and the mother are discussing a life the crone says, "You're too **soft**. Both of you. Much too soft" (Gaiman 3), which makes the mother clip the life, showing that they defer to the crone. *The Kindly Ones* is not only named for these three, but it also begins and ends with them, bookmarked by their power. In many ways, they are the ones who are the moving force behind what goes on in this story. Their spirit is felt in each episode and minor digression that appears.

For example, at one point in the story Rose sits and talks with several elderly ladies, one of which tells her a fairy tale. This fairy tale at first appears irrelevant, but the grotesque elements of the story are what connect it to the overall story arc. At the end of the story several things are reflected (see fig. 101). To begin, his wife has begun to resemble the face of Puck. He

Fig. 101 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 132

is, along with Loki, one of the important movers of the story. Next, the very punishment that Loki has been receiving for hundreds of years is reflected in the man's punishment. Loki's punishment is waiting for him when he is done trying to kill Dream. Even the way the man is entwined in the writing body of the serpent reflects how Loki is tied down by the entrails of his son. Also, the story shows a woman getting her revenge on a man who killed his own family, which is precisely what is happening to Dream with the furies. The grotesque, in context of this fairy tale, depicts how the literariness of the comic continues being represented in even the sub-stories that Gaiman includes. As he develops and makes use of different types of grotesque, so too does the reader differentiate and connect the grotesque to the overall tale, which reveals its literary power since it is able to dominate, control, and, ultimately, influence the entire story.

Another important aspect of the way the grotesque can work in comics is the fact that the visual elements always reflect on the words that are included in the panel. They work together, but they do not have to be obviously linked; in fact, some of the most effective panels in comics can be so because the words seem to be working against the picture. Because of the inherent tension of these panels parallel the inherent tension of the grotesque, these are the times that the grotesque's power is shown even more sharply. Several examples of this grotesque are found in *Sandman*, but one in particular stands out in *The Kindly Ones* (see fig. 102). A woman is dying of AIDS. She is young, but now looks like a cadaverous old woman. However, in the last panel she says "Did I ever tell you the story about the footsteps in the sand, and there are two sets of footsteps together, because some of the are GGGGGG - - God's except there aren't always two of them. And the woman says to God, where were you when I was in trouble? And He says, that was me carrying you" (Gaiman 5). The words are pretty and uplifting, especially viewed in the context of her being the one in trouble and needing help, but the image is an intense close-up of

Fig. 102 Gaiman *The Kindly Ones* 97

Zelda's weak eye, complete with red spots. The juxtaposition between the words and the images in this case creates a question about the words and their apparent sweetness. She is decaying away, and that is what sticks out predominately because the grotesque aspects as depicted in the visual will always dominate the rest of the story. The paradox of the grotesque once again arises. We are perhaps more human than ever when facing death because we realize how much we treasure life, but, at the same time and for almost the same reason, we are also never so inhuman when facing death. This dichotomy points to the literariness of the comic grotesque.

The Wake

The Wake is the ending volume to the *Sandman* series and provides the closure that the readers need after Dream dies. It is a poignant piece, full of heartache, reminiscence, goodbyes, and hope. In many ways, this volume is different than any other. Part of that has to do with the artists who created it. One set of stories is done directly from Michael Zulli, the artist,'s pencil drawings. They were not inked, which was fairly new at the time that *The Wake* first was published. This technique allows Dream's actual wake to be softer, more welcoming, and more like the dream world as a result. The other stories in this section are also done in unique styles. "Exiles" is drawn in the Japanese style of calligraphy and pen and ink, a stark contrast to "The Tempest," which returns back to the more familiar mainstream comic style. All of these different techniques and approaches work to build the end of *Sandman*. Interestingly, each of these also work to bring out the grotesque.

As mentioned before, the first issues in *The Wake* were not inked, merely penciled, which made them gentler. However, this did not completely remove them from the grotesque. Rather, it brought out the more subtle elements of the grotesque and the unconscious power of manipulation that the grotesque has on the viewer, illuminating another aspect of the paradox.

For the eloquent closing of the Sandman we knew, artist Michael Zulli, according to Hy Bender, "leaned heavily on the work of Symbolists, a group of turn-of-the-century painters who anticipated psychoanalysis by determining that certain objects often represented other things in a viewer's mind, and so deliberately selected images to evoke specific impressions or feelings" (211-12). This influence is important and notable because it means that Zulli freely chose elements that would mean something to the viewer on a deeper level than he might be able to realize. Dream is the one who died, and his realm is that of nightmares. As a result, Zulli incorporates them in the attendees of the wake (see fig. 103). The figures that dominate the

Fig. 103 Gaiman *The Wake* 42

panels are the man and the woman who appears to be weeping blood, but all of the figures in the background become important players in the unconscious aspects of the story. These are the figures that might go unnoticed the first time someone is reading through *The Wake*, but they are still there, and the reader still took them in even if he did not realize it. They are all unsettling, from the sucked in head to the stitched on face, which further unsettles the reader as he attempts to say good bye to the character he has spent the past nine volumes getting to know.

The grotesque figures in the first stories of *The Wake* infiltrate the story. They are everywhere present. From the Lady Bast, who has the body of a woman but the head of a cat, to Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead who is a dog-man. These grotesque figures are the ones who give the eulogy, but they do not make the wake grotesque so much as move the gentle good bye onward. Finally, the wake ends with a grotesque dreamlike sequence with Morpheus' boat sailing on a universal sea (see fig. 104). The boat's head changes from Dream's helmet to his

Fig. 104 Gaiman *The Wake* 84

actual face. The sea has dead bodies floating in it and allows Dream's body to disappear. This surreal spread is the final farewell to Morpheus and, notably, ends with powerful grotesqueness.

The other two styles present in *The Wake* make up the last two stories: "Exile" and "The Tempest." "Exile" is dominated with the white negative space that surrounds the panels, mainly because this story does not always have clear demarcations between the different panels. This story probably has the least amount of the grotesque in the entire *Sandman* series. Only the Sandman, in both of his manifestations, as both Morpheus and Daniel appear, seems to be grotesque (see fig. 105 and 106). These two representations make Dream look like a monster,

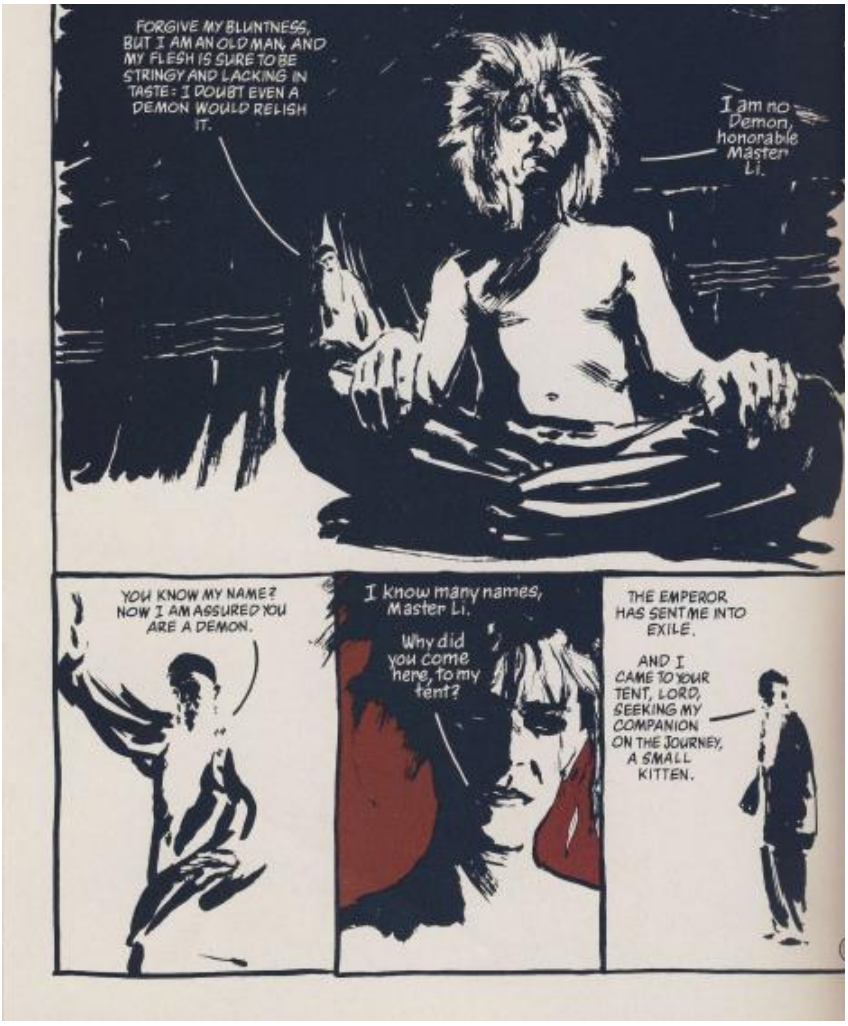

Fig. 105 Gaiman *The Wake* 132

Fig. 106 Gaiman *The Wake* 140

which the man certainly takes him for, even questioning if he is a demon, which points back to Kayser's assertion that the grotesque is often used to moderate the demonic (188). This works to show not only the connection between the old Dream and the new one, but also to connect this story with the rest. Interestingly, the two depictions of Dream represent the two greatest divisions, or paradoxes, between the grotesque: the horrifying grotesque with the sweet grotesque. Morpheus' Dream is much darker and more inhuman than Daniel's presentation, which still seems other, but other in a way that is more approachable than Morpheus'. Daniel's more approachableness is best seen in the fact that he is always shown wearing white, while Morpheus was forever presented in blacks. "The Tempest," the last story in the *Sandman* saga, is full of grotesque elements. Once again it shows the joining between reality and fantasy. Shakespeare, as he drinks in the local pub, sees a "savage man" (see fig. 107) who he reinterprets into the grotesque Caliban (see fig. 108). This give and take that is present in "The Tempest" represents the themes in the piece as Shakespeare questions whether or not he has made the right

Fig. 107 Gaiman *The Wake* 155

Fig. 108 Gaiman *The Wake* 169

choices. However, even as this seemingly mundane question is asked, he goes to visit Sandman in his castle where he is surrounded by grotesque representations of Sandman's family (see fig. 109). These dominating figures, that are in the background during their whole conversation,

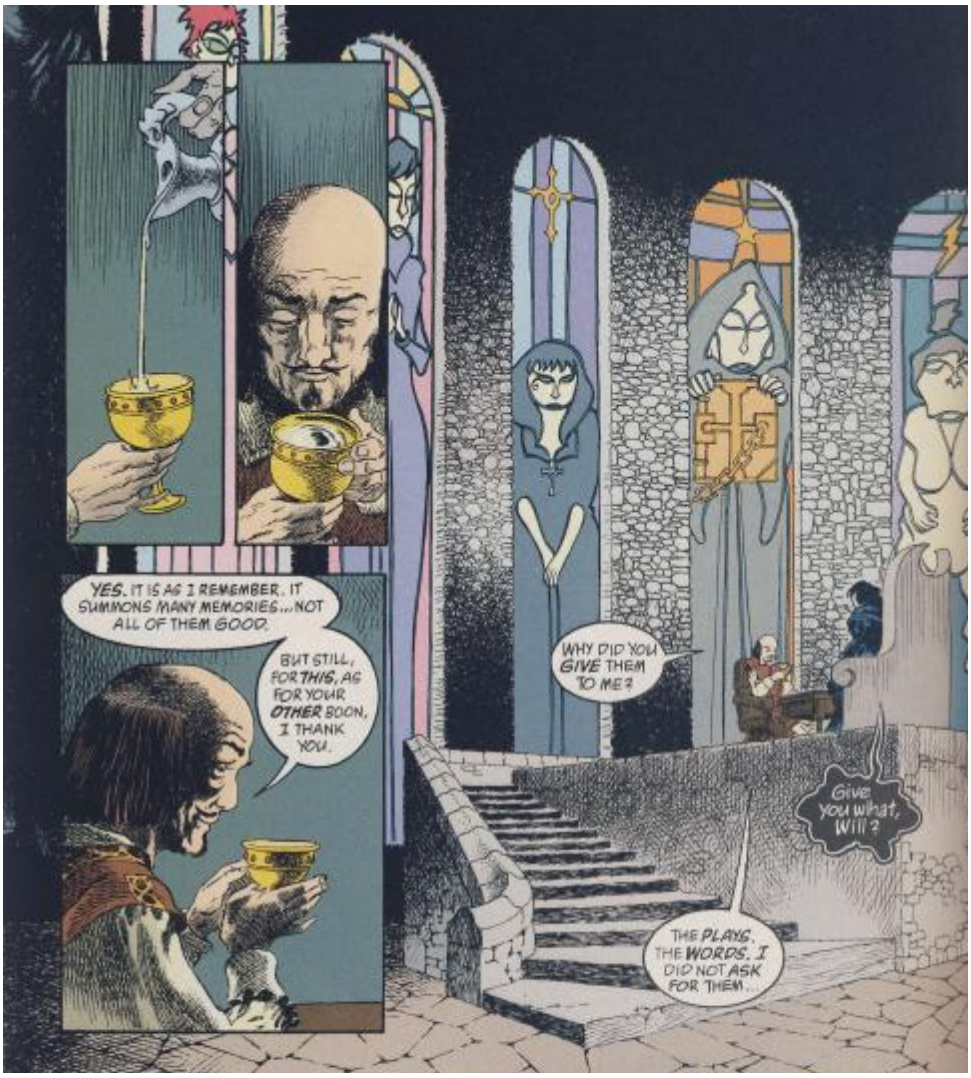

Fig. 109 Gaiman *The Wake* 178

show how the grotesque in *The Wake* worked more behind the scenes than right out in the open, but was nevertheless still quite effective.

Essentially, in the last five volumes of *Sandman*, the full power of the grotesque is revealed. In these volumes, Gaiman completely explains the distinct uses and representations of the comic grotesque. The grotesque is what controls the story and how the reader possesses, ingests, and understands the story. This power, which in turn, elevates the comic medium as it makes use of the grotesque. In this way, the grotesque is taken from being a mere literary tool –

as seen in prose work – and reanimated into a reason for literariness to be present in comics, as displayed particularly the last five volumes.

Chapter Five

Final Analysis

Thus, the grotesque in *Sandman* is not only an important element that reveals much about the story; it is part of what actually controls the direction the story takes provides the literary nature of the story, and reflects Gaiman's development as an artist, and the advancement of the comic form. It is often the key to unlocking the literariness of comics, illuminated in the many paradoxes it holds and reconciles, as seen in the consistent evolution of the grotesque in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. From grotesque elements that are present throughout, like Dream's inhuman appearance and transformation, to those elements that only arise in a few stories, like the decorative paneling that harkens back to the very first development of the definition of the grotesque, it is clear that they are an integral part of the entire *Sandman* series. It reveals the fact that *Sandman* can act as a manual for the grotesque elements in comics. It moves from one extreme of the spectrum to the other and embodies both the gentle and the aggressive grotesque. In fact, without these elements the entire tragedy would be altered completely and would lose much, if not all, of its power.

Ultimately, the importance of studying and attempting to understand the grotesque nature is because of what it reveals to humans. It unflinchingly shows us what we look like. There is beauty in us, but also deep stains of ugliness. In having both, the sin nature of man is obvious. We cannot be perfect, as reflected in the body, which is why we relate to the grotesque. Apart from the Lord, humans will always stay flawed and separate from themselves and other: grotesque. The grotesque is always both wholly human and wholly other – rather like the strange idea of Jesus Christ being wholly man and wholly God. Both exist simultaneously in a human,

which is why the grotesque is important to study. It reveals to us the aspects of self that are removed.

The ways the grotesque manipulates comics is notable throughout *Sandman* because of all the different elements it draws on and reveals. Part of the grotesque's power can come from merely being embodied in the image on the page as that is what first arrests the reader's attention. One element of the grotesque presented in a panel on a page can take control and force the reader to fixate on just this aspect or to at least give it more thought than the other panels, as seen in Eve's story during "The Parliament of the Rooks" (see fig. 110). The skinless second wife of Adam, who in the story is nameless, dominates the page, even though it is just in the bottom two panels, even marginalizing Lilith's position on Adam. Also, the grotesque has the

Fig. 110 Gaiman *Fables of Reflections* 214

power to be recalled to the reader's mind and then alter the story as a result. So, the visual power of the grotesque is notable and important to how comics work. A grotesque image, which tends to stick in the mind of the reader longer than a gentler picture, can influence the ideas of a story later on. This idea actually comes into action in Eve's story as well because Adam saw the second wife created and could not bear to go near her because seeing her made piece by piece was simply too disturbing.

An important element in *Sandman*'s grotesque's literary quality is linked to the violence and the theme of the injury to the eye that is present throughout. This is true especially near the end: "ravens chat with Matthew as they peck out a dead Gilbert's eyes. And just one page later, there's a close-up of two empty sockets in Loki's face after the Corinthian has, off camera, plucked out and devoured the old god's eyes" (Bender 255). When discussing Gaiman's script they reveal an interesting theme:

> At the beginning of your script for the issue, you refer to this mayhem in your typically understanding way, writing that the story's events include "fighting and burning and banging and so forth – not to mention the injury to the eye motif, which has always been a part of *Sandman* . . . thank you, Dr. Wertham." That's a reference to Fredric Wertham, the author of the infamous 1953 book *Seduction of the Innocent* that argued violence in comic books causes juvenile delinquency. (Bender 255)

The idea for the injury to eye is largely important when viewed in the context of the grotesque because "comics is an entirely visual medium – that is, the content isn't conveyed by sound, or touch, or taste, just sight – I think it's perfectly natural that an 'injury to eye' theme would develop in horror comics" (Gaiman qtd. in Bender 255). The fact that this theme develops in

horror comics, a genre that always includes elements of the grotesque, is important because what is grotesque is only seen by the eye, just as comics are only experienced by the eye. The power that the grotesque holds is reiterated by the fact that themes within a work are a direct result of it. This reason explains why comic grotesque leads or connects to the literary quality present.

Comics are a visual medium. They can only be appreciated by sight because they are never able to be merely read aloud, as many books have now been performed for books on tape or CD. This format makes the connection between comics and the reader much more palpable because the reader often places himself in the position of the drawn image, which includes the grotesque images. However, many people falsely assume that the grotesque is something that pushes the reader away. In actuality, what makes the grotesque so intriguing is how it both repels and entices the viewer. The grotesque's appealing aspects can be seen in Stephen Rauch's perspective on the *Sandman* characters. He lists off the ones that he loves, from Matthew the talking bird to the fairy Nuala. Rauch even goes so far as to say that he has "*been* all these characters" (146). Thus, he is reading, seeing, and thinking about grotesque characters, called so by the very differences they carry in terms of being physically human, and actually seeing himself within them. This fact shows the attraction that the grotesque can have even as the reader is comforted as he remembers the fact that he is not truly this grotesque thing.

Even though the grotesque can be appealing, by its very nature there is always a repulsive part apparent as well. Renata Sancken argues that "the ability to recognize when you are letting someone or something else define you" is a constant theme in *Sandman* (63), which is an intriguing thought when juxtaposed to the comic grotesque as it is something that gives real purpose, literariness, and power to the story. Perhaps the thing defining the person is his physicality, which puts the focus on the most obvious, but not what has been typically seen as

the most important. When someone is other than society, he wants to hide it, which is allowing society to define one. Instead, as *Sandman* suggest one should be himself. A great example of this idea is seen in Rose' cross-dressing landlord. At the beginning of the story, he only brings out Dolly, his alter ego, when he is feeling vivacious and a little crazy. However, by the end of *The Kindly Ones* he has become a well-known personality who condemns the very thing he is, which is shown as wrong. Not until he peels away what is fake about himself is he able to be forgiven by Rose, which shows that all of the grotesque in *Sandman* is merely pushing the reader into honesty, which reflects Bakhtin's belief that the grotesque brings the reader into the more concrete. Thus, the grotesque acts as a bearer of truth, which points to its literary power.

Overall, it is the breadth of the grotesque that *Sandman* displays that is so impressive and meaningful to the comic world as a whole. *Sandman*'s jump from overt, sometimes over the top, grotesque to a subtler grotesque that labors with the story as it controls it shows how the grotesque can work and when it does too much to the story. Essentially, focusing on *Sandman* as a manual of the comic grotesque shows that the grotesque is an important part of comics because of its overwhelming power, but it also displays that a person who well understands how to use the grotesque can do important and fascinating work with it, essentially elevating the comic genre because of its proper use. The grotesque itself reconciles opposites and literariness requires the reconciliation of opposites as well, which displays the inherent linkage between the grotesque and the literary. The two sections of the grotesque are also shown eloquently within *Sandman*. In this way, *Sandman* works as a great example of the power of the grotesque in comics and what is the best way to achieve a firm literariness while using the grotesque, displayed beautifully in the second half of *Sandman*.

Ultimately, the grotesque in comics should not be minimized but needs to be taken keen note of. Just seeing how important the grotesque is in *Sandman,* shows how vital it is for other comics as well. This fact is partly because of the way the reader ingests the story, and partly because of how it shows the literariness of comics, especially since comics tend to share a particular genre that typically draws quite heavily from grotesque imagery. This does not mean that only the grotesque should be focused on because that would lose the importance of other vital elements, but the grotesque's power should be studied more and understood to better enhance comics overall place in culture as the importance of the comic grotesque is much more palpable than the prose grotesque which does not have the same action fulfillment as the comic. Comics are a growing part of the society and as such will continue to be studied more and appreciated on deeper levels. As this continued study occurs, the grotesque should also enjoy the same treatment to allow readers of comics to gain a richer understanding of the literariness in comics as displayed by the grotesque.

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