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Jack K. Mallard

Brigham Young University - Provo

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Death Becomes Her: Theodicy in Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*

Jack Mallard

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Gloria L. Cronin, Chair
Daniel K. Muhlestein
Carl Sederholm

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Death Becomes Her: Theodicy in Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*

Jack Mallard
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

A study of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, particularly "The Sound of Her Wings" and "The Kindly Ones: Part 13," demonstrates its theological richness. *The Sandman*'s ability to participate in theodicy becomes clear by framing that study within a framework provided by Ernest Becker's ideas about the terror of death and Karen Armstrong's observations of the historical utility of negative theology and compassion. The analysis of the formal characteristics of *The Sandman* shows the range of aesthetic possibility inherent in the comics form. Lastly, the study makes apparent the continued readerly desire for engagement with questions about God, transcendence, death, and evil.

Keywords: *The Sandman*, Neil Gaiman, Ernest Becker, Karen Armstrong, death, theodicy

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Schroeder: When I hear a great symphony performed it makes me glad I'm alive! As long as I have my music I think I can face whatever life has to offer.

Lucy: Uh huh. I feel the same way about paper dolls.

Charles Schulz, *Peanuts*

Dreams make no promises.

Neil Gaiman

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last twenty-five years, the works of Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, much of postmodern literature, and nearly all of Holocaust literature brood over questions of the nature, presence, and interaction of God and evil with the world. These authors spend significant time considering these issues: the question of evil, the presence or existence of God, the range of freedom and responsibility, and humanity's burdens, privileges, and obligations vis-à-vis these questions. The focus of these investigations shifts through time, but, historically, the search for a justification for a beneficent, omnipotent God despite the pervasiveness of evil, has persisted, generating a postmodern subgenre of its own, theodical fictions. In addition to Morrison and McCarthy, comic book creators—particularly Art Spiegelman, Grant Morrison, and Neil Gaiman—have contributed significantly to this subgenre.

Traditional theodicy, or the problem of evil, has taken one of four (or some combination of the following) chief forms: the first form, soul-making: to become spiritually fit to dwell with God the soul must overcome certain ordeals. That needed resistance is applied by evil. The second form places great value on a libertarian conception of free will, obligating God to allow free reign of behavior. The third form, and closely related to the second, insists that the freedom to do great evil is valued because free will would be worth very little if the range of moral

possibilities were limited. The fourth form only accounts for natural evils and claims that a world must operate according to natural laws and forms regardless of the resultant individual suffering (Cooley). Theodical fiction, as subgenre to theodicy, refers to those works that seek out or critique constructions for negotiating the expectations, obligations, soul-making, and consequences of evil on human beings and their societies.

Accordingly, *The Sandman*, a comic book series penned by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by a number of artists, also seeks to intervene with, and participate in, the question of evil in the universe. Within the universe of *The Sandman* there exists a panoply of gods and goddesses, deities, mythical and fantastical beings, side-by-side with contemporary humanity. Behind the rest of existence is The Endless, comprised of seven siblings—Death, Dream, Destiny, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium—who embody the foundational aspects of life and are older than the gods. Dream, known chiefly by the name Morpheus, is the eponymous lead of the series. In addition to the dispersal of deific powers, the gods and goddesses in *The Sandman*, similar to many other ancient pantheons, are definitively presented as *imperfect* and *limited* beings; frail, fragmented, idiosyncratic demigods. As consequence of this de-centering of presence, Gaiman and his collaborating artists side-step the traditional theodical notion that evil's reality precludes the existence of God. As God's motivations and ends are literally inscrutable, even unknowable to the angels, and the presence of God and gods is taken as axiomatic, *The Sandman's* theodicy inevitably turns to the question of how to cope with and negotiate a world where evil is present. This theodicy is not concerned with what evil says or does not say about God or His/Her potential divine attributes, such as justice or holiness. In this essay I will demonstrate that *The Sandman's* embrace of formal limitations, such as fragmentation, delimitation, and iconic representation, provide a model for the creation of

framing narratives that, with the inclusion of apophatism, or negative theology, and compassion, can result in the mitigation of evil associated with the terror of death. Accordingly, I will provide a review of the critical treatment of *The Sandman* and summarize Ernest Becker's diagnosis of the roots of the problem of evil and Karen Armstrong's contributions towards a mitigation of that evil, in preparation for a close reading of the graphic or iconic elements of two issues, "The Sound of Her Wings" and "The Kindly Ones: Part 13," to show the value of recognizing death as a temporal limit and incorporating stories to answer the demands of those limits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To this end I will provide a review of the critical literature on *The Sandman* to show Gaiman's expertise in telling stories with theodical significance. A brief review of the relatively scant critical attention that *The Sandman* has received justifies assessing *The Sandman*'s participation in wrangling with the problem of evil. *The Sandman*, along with Frank Miller's Batman opus, *The Dark Knight Returns*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, and Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir/biography *Maus*, were central to comics capturing mainstream and critical attention in the mid- to late-1980s. However, unlike Moore, Spiegelman, and Miller, Gaiman has mostly escaped critical attention despite *The Sandman* selling, at times, more than a million issues per year, more than half to women (Hasted). Much of the critical focus has been given to examinations of his "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a re-imagining of the genesis of Shakespeare's play, drawn by Charles Vess, and the teasing of the notions of sacrality/banality of living through his affinity for intertextuality.

Scholars examining Gaiman's use of William Shakespeare and his plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, have dealt primarily with the importance of stories in making sense of the human condition, including the way those narratives inform human relations.

Echoing Ernest Becker, Joe Sanders claims that our “normal human condition, as Gaiman sees it, is a nervous estrangement from other humans and from ourselves.... [A]rt helps us step outside the supposed limit of ourselves so that we can better see present realities and new possibilities” (246). The theater and Shakespeare and comics and Gaiman, point out this mutual and reciprocal constructedness of stories that occurs between storytellers and audiences. John Pendergast notes that “throughout the *Sandman* series, myth is thematically treated as a dynamic and active collaboration between artist and audience, and between the artist and the artist’s larger cultural tradition” while “emphasiz[ing] the necessity of work and labor in the creation of art” (186, 189). By drawing this connection, Pendergast hopes to show how groups and individuals can be bound in their creation of narratives, thus also providing an additional incentive to maintain the unions. Not only do artists and storytellers open a dialogue with their audiences, but also both groups begin to have a stake in the ways in which stories are told. Kurt Lancaster, in his piece on *The Sandman*’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” also points out the role that *The Sandman* can play in negotiating the problem of evil. He writes, “The search for answers ... discloses the mythic function of art that needs to be practiced in everyday life” (75) Additionally, Pendergast notes how Gaiman rightfully raises the stakes for creating, telling, and receiving stories as these acts contain “the possibility of death ... [that] the world of dreams and imagination is quite dangerous” (193).

Much critical attention has also been given to Gaiman’s affinity for wonder in the world and in words, which results in a sacralization through/of stories. Stephen Rauch frames his study of *The Sandman* by describing a spiritual woundedness inflicting society. Rauch suggests reading Gaiman’s *The Sandman* through Joseph Campbell, as a modern myth, in order to recapture meaning. Another writes that the drive for meaning and knowledge outside of the

realm of rationalism and/or materialism, which are almost exclusively favored in our contemporary moment, provides a necessity for the imagination and the numinous (Cetiner-Oktem). Clay Smith warns of the possible elision of intertextuality and polysemy in reading Gaiman's works, claiming that "[s]uch exclusivity and denial of the text's hybridity in favor of hierarchy and stasis run counter to the apparent inclusivity and alterity that Gaiman claims to promote in his texts." In a study on Gaiman's contributions to a British comix work, *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament*, and *The Sandman*, Cyril Camus explores the ways Gaiman plays on and with the instability of the interconnectedness of the banal/sacred binary. Gaiman's stories in *Outrageous* emphasize the inherent human-ness of the Biblical characters and peoples, while *The Sandman* seeks to sacralize the frequently marginalized. As a conclusion, Philip Sandifer and Tof Eklund, editors of *ImageText*'s special issue, "The Comics Work of Neil Gaiman," argue for a diversification of the theoretical and disciplinary approaches to Gaiman, emphasizing in particular the promise of intertextuality in his works.

Gaiman, for his part, stresses this idea of intertextuality and communal interrogation and vetting of our stories: "we have the right, or the obligation, to tell old stories in our own ways, because they are our stories..." ("*Einstein*" 68). Dana Goodyear calls his works "genre pieces that refuse to remain true to their genres," and describes how he reaps his "sources from English folktales to glam rock and the midrash" (*The New Yorker*). Elsewhere, Neil Gaiman wrote what could be called his creed, except for its insistence on evading concrete pronouncements: "I can believe things that are true and I can believe things that aren't true and I can believe things where nobody knows if they're true or not ... I believe that life is a game, that life is a cruel joke, and that life is what happens when you're alive and that you might as well lie back and enjoy it" (*American Gods* 394-95). This statement elucidates Gaiman's belief in the power of belief and in

living, and how the narratives we choose to believe in promise flexibility, utility, even intimacy.

ERNEST BECKER AND *THE DENIAL OF DEATH*

Important to my theoretical argument are two thinkers, Ernest Becker and Karen Armstrong. By summarizing Ernest Becker's argument of the roles of terror and death, and how they can often result in evil, I will show how *The Sandman* can be seen as a theodical fiction negotiating with the problem of evil. Becker, in his works *The Denial of Death* and *Escape From Evil*, provides a description of the development, pervasiveness, and historical consequences of—even the centrality of—*memento mori*, or, according to his rubric, how mortality gives birth to the problem of evil. The problem arises from the unique dilemma facing humanity: their dual nature as both gods and animals. As gods, humanity carries the Janus-like burden-blessing of consciousness and imagination. As animals, they die. “[M]an is a worm and food for worms,” as Becker bluntly puts it (*Denial* 26). Terror is the result of this awareness of the finite. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker hypothesizes, via a synthesis of psychology, philosophy, and theology, that the fear of death, and its accompanying oblivion, acts as the chief mechanism driving human civilization (11). Civilization, and the individuals composing it, attempt to disguise humanity's inherent mortality through the creation of *causa sui*, or “immortality,” projects.

It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakeable meaning. (*Death* 5)

Immortality projects attempt to secure a transcendence of death by uniting the body or culture to an idea that will persist beyond the extinction of the individual or culture. These protests must contest the specter of death otherwise looming universally over mankind.

As Becker concludes *The Denial of Death*, he defines evil as those violent consequences of immortality systems failing to be convincing; theodical fictions, then, must engage with the way that peoples and individuals compose and revise immortality projects. As individuals, nations, and cultures invest their very existence in the success of their immortality projects, the prospect of failure very literally means death for its adherents. Thus, when confronted with a contradictory hero system, and the suggestion that the system is impotent to its salvific objective, violent conflict must result (*Escape* 123-27). Historically, these conflicts have occurred between faiths, with the Crusades, between nations, as the rabid nationalism of World War I demonstrates, between ideologies, with the clash of western capitalism and eastern variations of Marxism; racism, sexism, and other forms of hatred all have roots in the defense of a particular immortality system. As cultures inevitably come into contact with one another, the apparently contradictory systems threaten the projects' ability to magically or symbolically banish or avoid the terror proffered by death. These narrative clashes led to actual conflict—war—or the abandonment of the immortality system, which leads to its own unique problems.

Examining the potential consequences of losing an immortality project re-frames Becker's paradox: stories must retain their potency to assist their adherents in coping with the immensity of death and transcendence; but the stories must be flexible, too, to avoid inflicting evil on others by insisting on viewing outsiders as existential threats. Many traditional immortality systems, such as Christianity or nationalism, have lost their potency with the overthrow of the idea of the transcendent—i.e. God, the soul, etc—that has gradually been effected over the last two hundred years of Western history (*Denial* 7). This overthrow presents another dilemma: the devaluing of the power of the immortality project by erasing the significance of difference at play. One critic described how this phenomenon occurs. The “boutique multiculturalist” respects the outward

affectations of other cultures, peoples, and faiths—their ethnic restaurants, quaint religious rituals, participates (or even leads) literary deconstructions of their myths and stories, and interesting tribal dress—but “will withhold approval of a particular culture’s practices at the point at which they matter most to its strongly committed members” (Fish 380). In other words, the difference enacted by narratives becomes curious but ultimately inconsequential gilding when compared to the universality of our shared humanity. This dismissal can result in a drifting alienation that suggests impotence in the face of the universe, or, again, the threat of violence in the form of fundamentalism.

Becker shows that, when faced with the boundaries installed by death’s imminence, humanity desperately resists, and that resistance takes a distinctly creative shape. Religions, mythologies, fables, ideologies, hypotheses—stories of all kinds bloom out of the dual attempt to simultaneously understand and resist the immensities and ineffability of the physical universe. These narratives continue their resistance materially, as well, in the Great Sphinx of Giza, St. Peter’s Basilica, the Great Wall of China, NASA’s Apollo program—all works created as consequence of and monument to powerful and persuasive narratives. However, too often throughout history, these creative narratives have split the adhering factions into warring tribes, as the stakes have simply been too large for surrender. To surrender means more than to die; surrender means oblivion. What Becker hopes as he ends *Death* is that, being aware of how limits push innovation and the history of this impulse towards a creative, desperate destruction, we will begin to compose new stories and adapt the old stories so that the natural evil, generated throughout history by the fear of death, can begin to be minimized. Theodical fictions, then, seek to intervene in this process, by identifying how narratives contribute to the proliferation of evil, and how that proliferation can be short circuited or re-routed.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: APOPHATISM AND COMPASSION

With my second theorist, Karen Armstrong, a religious historian and philosopher, I will suggest that an embrace of apophatism, which I discuss below, and an ethos of compassionate living would do much to reconcile humanity to the immensity and complexity of human existence on earth. Therefore, I will show how *The Sandman* experiments with apophatic and compassionate themes to anticipate contributing to Becker's hope for stories that will perpetuate the mitigation of evil. And, much like Becker, Armstrong also deals with the dual-faceted human creature. While Becker describes man's dilemma by asserting that man is a god and a beast, Armstrong maintains that, historically, humanity has interacted with and interrogated the cosmos via two truth-seeking traditions: *mythos* and *logos*. *Logos*, or reason, approaches reality in a "pragmatic mode" to learn, understand, and apply knowledge of the external reality in order to survive (*Case xi*). Where the territory of *logos* ends, *mythos* begins, a complementary means of interaction with nature. The role of *mythos*, writes Armstrong, is to give instruction on "how to live more richly and intensely, how to cope with our mortality, and how creatively to endure the suffering that flesh is heir to" (xii). It is within this context of the complementing *mythos-logos* paradigm that the benefits of apophatism and a compassionate ethos appear.

Apophatism, negative theology, or *Via Negativa*, explains a philosophical approach that seeks to describe God by what God is not, as any positive definition can only elide the difference between the divine and human or natural attributes. This approach emphasizes the inscrutability of God and, in many ways, of knowledge of the "big questions" with which *mythos* has concerned itself: questions such as how to cope with pain, tragedy, and the apparent finitude of death. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, provides an example of apophatism in his definition of God as "that thing than which nothing more perfect can be thought" (as qtd in

Armstrong 132). As Armstrong explains, Anselm's declaration is a creative and imaginative exercise, one intended to encourage its practitioner to push at limits and then admit that certainty, and God, lay still beyond. A pursuit of this value provides insurance against the danger of idolatry, or labeling a historical perspective or situatedness as God or transcendence, which minimizes the likelihood of ideas about transcendence or religion leading to violence (321-22). While apophatism ultimately does rest on the uncertainty prevalent in the universe, it also insists on tasks such as play, silence, discovery, criticism, and belief as consequential in their own right (329-30). It is in this sense, then, that apophatism asserts itself as a hermeneutic with which to seek instruction on and carryout living and finding meaning.

The intellectual investigations and discipline required by apophatism on their own will not suffice in seeking ways to defuse the evil and anxiety associated with the fear of death. Apophatism, maintains Armstrong, must be coupled with "a compassionate lifestyle that enables us to break out of the prism of selfhood" (319). A compassionate and humane ethos calls for a de-centering of the self and does for our interpersonal relationships what apophatism does for the relationship with the transcendent. Similar to the way in which apophatism hedges against idolatry, compassion towards others seeks to curtail the occurrence and effects of selfishness, bigotry, pride, and tribal loyalties. The effect here is a lessening of violence as the concern for others elevates above the concern for oneself, allowing the anxiety vis-à-vis one's place in the universe to be qualified in pursuit of altruism.

Apophatism and compassion provide two important boundaries for negotiating the dilemma outlined by Ernest Becker, that humanity's desire for the transcendent and infinite is curbed by the looming specter of death, results in efforts to transgress the border erected by death via innovative and resourceful narratives and rituals. Unfortunately, those narratives often

enough result in violent conflicts between individuals and groups. Karen Armstrong's study of how religion can mentor its adherents in approaching the transcendent provides intellectual and practical principles for reducing the possibility of violence and conflict as result of self-centered and fractious immortality projects. By thinking and discoursing on the transcendent via apophatism and pursuing a compassionate lifestyle, the chances of mitigating the pains of the terror and denial of death grow larger. "[The ultimate] could not be accessed by rational, discursive thought but required a carefully cultivated state of mind and the abnegation of selfishness" (Armstrong 26). Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*'s provides an ideal site to examine the syncretism of Becker and Armstrong's ideas within the comics form, as well the accompanying narrative evolution of Morpheus and his eventual submission to death, demonstrate the power of the fear of death, as well as the potency of certain kinds of stories in coping with that trepidation.

"THE SOUND OF HER WINGS": RIGIDITY IN IMMORTALITY PROJECTS

Having reviewed the literature and laid out the theoretical paradigms of Becker and Armstrong, I wish to apply them to a close reading of the eighth issue of *The Sandman*, titled "The Sound of Her Wings." This issue demonstrates the value in acknowledging temporal and formal limits, namely the catalyzing of creativity in coping and thriving against such limits. The conversation between Morpheus and his sister, Death, acts as a proving ground for the claims of Ernest Becker; in particular, an analysis of the implementation of select formal characteristics of comics demonstrates the form's plasticity in meeting narrative exigencies. Ernest Becker, while acknowledging and even encouraging the utility of immortality projects to cope with the immensity of death and the finitude of the human creature, also warns of the possibility of evil resulting from a failure to examine and reassess such narratives, and grant their contingency and subjectivity. A comics writer and theoretician, Scott McCloud's elaborations on the picture plane

and the gutter, to be discussed later, provide theoretical tools for the formal analysis of these principles in “The Sound of Her Wings.”

As the events of “The Sound of Her Wings” open, Morpheus has recently been freed from magical captivity, reclaimed the tools taken from him, and exacts revenge against Alex Burgess, the son of Roderick, a magus who captured him. Receiving a visit from his sister, Death, while feeding pigeons in an English park, Morpheus explains his plight: “... [S]uddenly, the quest was over. I felt ... drained. Disappointed. Let down. Does that make sense? I had been as sure that as soon as I had everything back I’d feel good. But inside I felt worse than when I started. I feel like, nothing” (218). After patiently listening and asking why Morpheus never came to her, Death responds to Morpheus’s complaint, “You are *utterly* the stupidest, most *self-centered*, appallingest *excuse* for an *anthropomorphic personification* on *this* or any *other* plane! An *infantile, adolescent, pathetic* specimen! Feeling all *sorry* for yourself because your little *game* is *over*, and you haven’t got the—the *balls* to go and find a *new* one!” (emphasis in original; 219). Death’s rejoinder to what she calls Morpheus’s sulking ends with an invitation to join her as she goes about her duties.

Morpheus joins Death as she ushers people from life to death. Gaiman lingers on the deaths of three individuals: an old, Jewish, fiddle player, a young female stand-up comic, and a baby. Morpheus watches as Death talks with, comforts, and validates each of these three, then she embraces them and he only hears “the gentle beating of mighty wings” (230). Throughout the issue Morpheus muses on the fear that humanity has of death, on the importance of the functions of the Endless, and the gentleness and respect with which Death fulfills her duties. Morpheus tells Death that, when he was captured, the Burgess cult was attempting to apprehend and confine her, as a means of controlling life and death, despite the fact, as Morpheus reminds

Death, “that [Dream] is far more terrible than you, my sister” (227). The issue concludes with Morpheus grateful for his sister’s company and what he has learned from a day with her, that what he sees as his governing responsibility can be performed in an open, compassionate, and productive manner.

“The Sound of Her Wings” brings many of Becker’s concerns to the forefront of *The Sandman*. Morpheus’s existence is derived—literally—from his responsibility as Dream of the Endless. The issues prior to “The Sound of Her Wings” follow Morpheus as he escapes his imprisonment, revenges himself on the Burgess family, and hunts down and recoups his tools from those that stole them. In the pursuit of his duties, among which he includes his revenging, Morpheus’s actions result in evil committed against others, including some of those closest to him. Morpheus condemns Nada, a lover who eventually spurns him, to hell; makes claim to Daniel Hall, a child conceived by Hippolyta and Hector Hall while they were in the Dreaming; disavows his son, Orpheus, upon Orpheus’s love-sick disobedience; among many others. This evil generally results from Morpheus’s elevation of his responsibility as Dream over the needs of others or, conversely, a short temper, tied to his arrogance and pride. Morpheus warns Hippolyta Hall that he will one day return to confiscate her son, that Daniel is his, without any attempt at an explanation of either his authority or the perceived necessity. This failure to empathize or dialogue with others, ultimately, brings Morpheus to his own death. The condemnation of Nada to torment in hell, contrariwise, arises from her perceived impudence to tell him his duties that he, one of the Endless, and her, a mortal, ought not to be. More often, however, the evil of Morpheus’s action results from his general lack of recognition of others. As his handyman Mervin Pumpkinhead remarks, “He’s gotta be the tragic figure standing out in the rain, mournin’

the loss of his beloved. So down comes the rain, right on cue. In the meantime everybody gets dreams fulla existential angst and wakes up feeling like hell. And we all get wet” (“Brief”).

The abdication of his brother, Destruction, demonstrates the fact that Morpheus perceives his existence as tied to the carrying-out of his responsibilities and creates meaning through that framework. Destruction carries on throughout the universe, ironically enough, experimenting with creating art through sculpture, poetry, gardening and cooking, and companionship with his dog, Barnabas. Despite the abandonment of his realm, sigil, and responsibilities, somehow destruction still occurs. Nevertheless, even if Morpheus’s literal existence is not dependent on fulfilling his obligation as Dream, he can’t, as will be demonstrated later, sever himself from what he feels is necessary and defining without losing his mooring. In addition to that personal definition of existence, the Endless, despite their name, can die or change. Despair, Morpheus’s sister, is not the first of her station, and Delirium, the youngest of the Endless, was known previously as Delight before an unrecounted event changed her. So, to a significant extent, Morpheus’s role as Dream of the Endless, and its accompanying responsibilities, are self-inflicted and determined. Morpheus’s admission to Death of his feeling of lack after accomplishing his revenge and the retrieval of his tools supports this conclusion. After his decades-long imprisonment, Morpheus’s fundamental ethos is rocked and he is unable to see his responsibilities in the same way he had before.

Death’s treatment of individuals and respect for humanity while carrying out her duties leaves a remarkable impression upon Morpheus, leaving him in a position to re-evaluate and configure the way that he sees his responsibility as Dream vis-à-vis those to be effected. Death and Morpheus stop first at the home of Harry, an elderly, Jewish fiddle player. Initially excited to have guests, Harry then recognizes Death and asks to be able to recite the Shema Yisrael, a

Jewish prayer glorifying God. After dying, Harry tells Death and Morpheus that “it’s good that I said the Sh’ma. My old man always said it would guarantee you a place in heaven. If you believe in heaven . . .” (224). Death recognizes the potency of the Shema for Harry and his death. In this case, the Shema, while a religious prayer lauding the omnipotence and transcendence of God, also serves as a rejoinder to the call of one’s people. Harry’s prayer may unite him with or offer comfort in a level of belief in God, but it absolutely ties him to his father. And it is only once this binding and hope have been re-affirmed and articulated that Harry is then taken into Death’s arms to face what comes next.

The plasticity of the comics form allows Gaiman much freedom in enabling even the form in the telling of his story in “The Sound of Her Wings.” (Despite the fact that Gaiman is the chief architect of *The Sandman* and its individual issues, to not acknowledge the series as a product of the collaboration of numerous individuals would belie the very complexity of the comics form; therefore, for convenience’s sake, Neil Gaiman, when discussing *The Sandman* specifically, as opposed to any of his other works, will refer to the author function, or the way in which Gaiman collaborates with particular artists—pencillers, inkers, and colorists—to create *The Sandman*.) The integration of Becker’s ideas into the very form of comics will become apparent by observing the relationship between panel layouts and their (lack of) frames, and the significance thereof, and Scott McCloud’s spectrum of pictorial vocabulary. By examining how Gaiman mobilizes a number of the formal attributes of comics, it will become evident how the form lays the foundation of this reading of *The Sandman* through Ernest Becker.

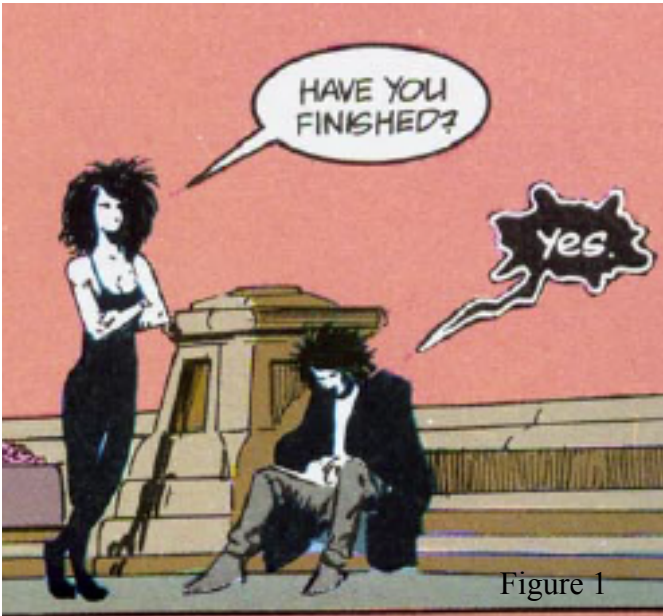
In his book, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud described the area of iconicity available to comics artists as a triangle. The three points, “reality,” the picture plane, and language, combine to form the spectrum of pictorial vocabulary. Language, as the second point

forming the area, represents the ultimate abstraction as, for the most part, the relationship between the signified and signifier is arbitrary. The picture plane represents the site where colors and shapes and lines mean only themselves, and do not represent any symbolic or iconic content. McCloud calls the line formed between “reality”—McCloud brackets “reality” to note that even a photograph would still lack in regards to reality—and language iconic abstraction. As artists begin to move away from reality and towards the abstraction of language, they become more cartoony, or they practice “amplification through simplification” (30). As icons move upwards towards the picture plane, McCloud calls this movement non-iconic abstraction.

The location of the iconic content of comics inside McCloud’s area of pictorial vocabulary affects the reading of the material. McCloud theorizes that the further an image moves along the line of iconic abstraction towards the point of language, and away from “reality,” “the more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (31), and, thus, the easier for the reader to identify with the characters, settings, and/or actions of the comics. “Realism” describes the images that appear to more closely hew to the verisimilitude of photographs, while still acknowledging the distance between a real face and any iconic rendering. McCloud continues, “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm” (36). He notes that Herge, in his *Tintin* comics, renders iconic characters against realistic background to encourage “readers to *mask* themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating word”; he suggests, too, that other “characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their ‘otherness’ from the reader” (43, 44).

Within “The Sound of Her Wings,” the characters portrayed veer towards the “realistic” end of the iconic abstraction line. Figure 1 represents the most “realistic” of these drawings, but

even when the characters are at their most abstract (meaning, from “reality” to language abstraction, not non-iconic abstraction), they tend to be rendered blurry, as if perceived from a distance, instead of becoming more iconic.



The iconicity of these drawings contributes to the alienation felt by Morpheus as he begins to come to terms with the self-centeredness of his immortality. This perception of distance and otherness confirms the narrative thrust of the potential problems of failing to de-center or account for others.

The relatively realistic rendering of the characters, most predominantly Morpheus and Death, is contrasted by the oftentimes complete abstraction of the backgrounds and/or settings (see again Figure 1). While Morpheus is drawn sitting on an obviously recognizable fountain, the background is simply a color. Blue, at times, but also purple, yellow, and even white. The frequent occurrence of this strategy suggests that Gaiman wishes to emphasize the importance of the actors and their actions above the verisimilitude of the events and their setting. These abstract backgrounds drive home the non-specific nature of these events, that while the particular events and circumstances are unique to Morpheus and his immortality project, the effects of an unexamined immortality project suffered here threaten anyone.

Traditional comic book and comic strip panels tend to be organized by tiers of strips, separated by gutters, on what is usually a white background. One way that that comic panels function is by using space to represent time. McCloud notes the propensity to perceive a single image as a single moment in time, such as a photograph (96). The panel frame encloses the moment—or action, usually. Still, although a single panel tends to represent more than a single moment, panel frames tend to circumscribe the length of that time. Gaiman takes advantage of this trait to comment on his characters' conscious acknowledgement of the role of death. At varying times, panels are traditionally separated by a gutter space against a blank page; divided crudely and rotated off of the standard 90 degree axis; and lack frames while characters, set objects, and backgrounds trespass into the (assumed) space of another panel.

The first third of “The Sound of Her Wings” employs the latter of these three techniques. Morpheus's feeding of the pigeons, and his conversation with Death, occur primarily within pages where the panels lack a visible frame as in Figure 2. This technique points out the elision or denial of the effects of time, namely the fear and event of death as manifested through the challenging of the immortality project, as experienced by Morpheus. Morpheus sought out and accomplished his revenge against the Burgess family and secured the tools taken from him at the time of his capture; however, these physical objects and actions, representing the way in which others see his power, duty, and the appropriate magnification of those, provide no satisfaction or relief, as assumed. Rather, Morpheus finds himself feeling aimless and drifting. Death reinforces this perception as she tells Morpheus about what she learned watching *Mary Poppins*:

There's this guy who's utterly a banker, and he doesn't have time for his family, or for living, or anything. And Mary Poppins, she comes down from the clouds, and she shows him what's important. Fun. Flying kites. All that stuff.

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious! [...] Utterly fantabulous word, huh? It means, y’know, great. Wonderful. Ginchy. Gnarly. (213)

Like the arbitrarily, but carefully, laid out panels and frames, Death readily admits, in her veneration of the neologism “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” that one’s approach to life (and death) can be made up. Thierry Groensteen calls the initial planning process of laying out the panels and their frames that compose the comic “gridding,” and stresses that “[w]hile remaining in question, it operates as a primary repartition of the narrative material” (144).

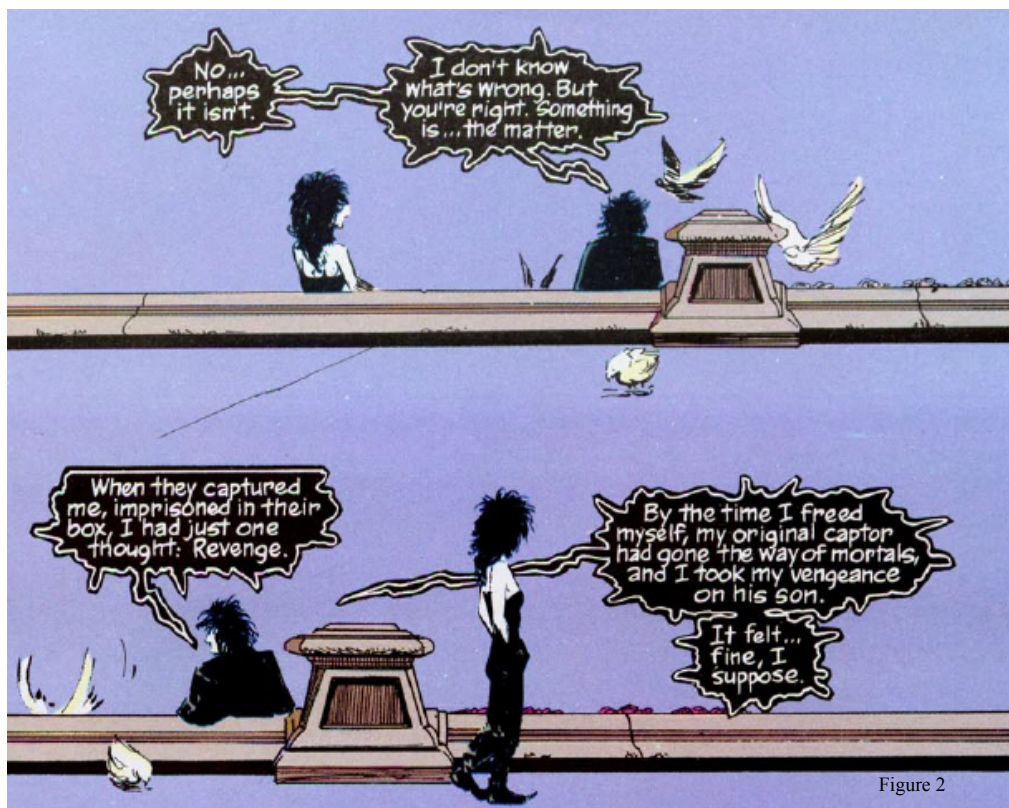


Figure 2

Morpheus still has the rudiments of his narrative material, his responsibility and commitment to that responsibility, but the relationships and structure that the project has heretofore held have faded and been called into question; Death wants him to discover a richer fulfillment through encouraging Morpheus to re-evaluate these priorities by introducing creativity, enthusiasm, and a recognition of time’s limitation to his sense of responsibility and purpose.

Once Morpheus accepts Death's invitation to spend the day with her, Gaiman begins to articulate the panels' frames and makes them visible, discrete units. This technique appears most commonly at the three deaths at which Morpheus and Death linger, as demonstrated in Figure 3.



Figure 3

Harry, a Jewish fiddle player, recites the Shema as he passes. All three of the panels showing Harry's recitation of the prayer and death are clearly distinct from the other tiers and panels, separated both by the white gutter space and the black line enclosing the panels. Jan Baetans, a scholar working in the Netherlands and Belgium, observed the following regarding the composition of comics: "For the comics creator, the initial problem consists to divide a blank page ... [That problem] determines its partitioning" (qtd in Groensteen 102). Groensteen continues, "the page layout . . . generally is invented at the same time that the drawings are realized" (101). As panels generally represent a partitioning of space and time, the addition of visible lines delineating each panel at the moment of particular characters' deaths provides a particularly salient effect. Time runs out, but we still decide what happens while it's running.

This act of partitioning, too, signals an acknowledgement that the whole story cannot be told, that not everything can be had or done, and not everything can be figured out or believed. The partitioning of space emphasizes the contingency of how we spend and divide our time via narrative: “Here is where I will look and concentrate now.” Harry’s decision to pray in his last moments signifies his privileging of his family and religious narrative. This carving up of space—gutters, panels, framed and unframed, networked images, fragments—revitalizes the possibility of multiple meanings as other individuals and spaces combine. As contrasted with the unguarded panels of the opening of “The Sound of Her Wings,” the framed panels narrating Harry’s praying and dying recognize the boundary represented by time and the necessity of configuring narratives to meet those temporal demands. Death grants Harry the opportunity to say his prayer, asks about his fiddle playing, answers what questions she can, and holds him as he continues from life to death. Both Harry and Death embrace the possibility that facing limits brings and use that possibility to commend the value of the individual and relationships.

“THE KINDLY ONES”: POTENCY OF CONTINGENT BOUNDARIES

Having highlighted the problems of impotent and intolerant immortality projects, and the potential benefits awaiting their recovery, I wish now to explicate how Morpheus’s internalization of Armstrong’s apophatic and compassionate principles prepares him to recoup his own death. In the penultimate storyline of *The Sandman*, “The Kindly Ones,” most fully represents the potency of embracing constructed, and admittedly contingent, boundaries both in Gaiman’s crafting of the comic and in Morpheus’s immortality project. Here, Morpheus’s revised sense of responsibility, arising from his greater sense of compassion and acceptance of contingency, prepares him to accept his own death, a journey began in “The Sound of Her Wings.” “The Kindly Ones” resolves a number of storylines presented earlier in the series.

Hippolyta Hall, whose son is kidnapped, presumes Morpheus guilty, as he decrees earlier that the boy would be his; Morpheus's son, the classical Orpheus, requested death as a mercy from his father; Nuala, a fairy slave given to Morpheus by the fairy queen Titania, is released from his service and sent home to Fairy with the promise of a boon should she ever need him. In his euthanizing of Orpheus, Morpheus is brought directly under the jurisdiction of the Erinyes, a triad of ancient witches, euphemistically referred to as the Kindly Ones or the Ladies, as one who has shed the blood of a family member. Hippolyta's fury at Morpheus leads her to the Ladies and they make mutual cause against Morpheus. Nuala calls for Morpheus's help as the Ladies siege at the gates of the Dreaming, and his departure threatens the Dreaming and ensures his death.

These three obligations that Morpheus has accrued represent the gamut of his growth. In the case of Hippolyta, and her son Daniel, Morpheus demonstrates a complete lack of empathy when he fails to even attempt to understand from where Hippolyta's anger, frustration, and denial arise. Orpheus requests euthanasia from his father because he has lived as a body-less head for millennia due, largely, to his father's resentment when his counsel was not kept. Morpheus eventually acquiesces to Orpheus's plea for death as a sign of sorrow and reconciliation. Nuala, on the other hand, receives her boon from Morpheus as a gesture of gratitude and kindness. Morpheus moves from actively soliciting the harm of others who have wronged or offended him to being unaware of the needs and interests of others to even seeking opportunities to acknowledge the positive difference, no matter how small, made by those around him. This last move, the granting of Nuala's boon, comes at the expense of Morpheus's life. Despite that awareness, Morpheus chooses to keep his word to one much weaker than him, effectuating his revision of his immortality project by prioritizing compassion and humanity to redefine his responsibilities as Dream. Specifically, as Morpheus and Death meet for the last

time, in “The Kindly Ones: Part 13,” Morpheus’s resolve to submit to death rather than forfeit the new found role that compassion and unknowing play in his immortality project admits the possibility of discovering a method for avoiding evil despite the aura of death. Again, examining the ways that Gaiman employs the comics form undergirds the claims made regarding Morpheus’s privileging of compassion, humanity, and unknowing in the face of death as he works. The principles of iconic solidarity and representation, as well as the way that the gutter contributes to meaning making in comics, provide potent sites for these examinations.

Iconic solidarity, according to Groensteen, is “the unique ontological foundation of comics” (17). This is defined as “interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated . . . and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*” (18). Basically, Groensteen is suggesting that the language of comics (and he does believe that it is a language before it is an art) creates meaning by the stringing together of multiple interdependent images to create narratological syntagms. These individual panels, and their accompanied iconic content, may or may not be enough to create a narratological utterance on their own and, while they are certainly discrete units organized in space, they do exist in concert with one another.

“The Kindly Ones” differs from much of *The Sandman* in its art style. Not only does Gaiman return to a traditional grid format of distinctly articulated panel frames, but he also sticks to a 2 x 3 arrangement throughout the issue that further reinforces the acknowledgement of time’s effects on mortality and the alienation that can lead to the creation of problematic immortality projects. This is an opportunity for Gaiman to pare down the narrative and formal elements to emphasize the potential alienation and the potential for evil created by the fear of death, a basic and fundamental mechanism according to Becker. Repeating this 2 x 3 template

allows Gaiman to very easily highlight momentous occasions within the narrative by varying from the template and to establish a calming, constant rhythm befitting the last moments of Morpheus's life.

Meanwhile, the appearance of the panels as discrete utterances belies the interconnectedness of the panels and the content within the panels. Craig Fischer describes two reading strategies employed by comics readers as developed by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle to come to terms with this phenomenon. The linear method accounts for the "narrative order in which we read a comic page, from panel to panel and from tier to tier." The second is the tabular where the reader approaches the page (or double-page) as a formal whole, "looking for formal patterns and deviations from formal patterns." The first page of "The Kindly Ones: Part 13" (see Figure 4) offers a superb example of the way in which the comics form can anticipate those actions by the reader. The six panels contained within this 2 x 3 frame depict Morpheus in the Dreaming awaiting the Ladies when his sister, Death, appears. Each of the six panels contains the same basic combination of figures and events (other than the first one that lacks Death): Morpheus sitting on large column of rock, lightning, rain, and a purple sky, presumably caused by some function of the lightning, siege of the Ladies, and the Dreaming itself.



Figure 4

While each of these panels contains the same figures and the same perspective, they differ in two important aspects. They portray different selections of time and different backdrops of sky. Interestingly, however, when the page is viewed with a tabular approach, one recognizes that the backgrounds across all six panels form one contiguous background. Despite the temporal difference across the panels and their appearance as individual units of space on the page, the tabular unity of the page suggest that meaning and associations can be made despite the apparent gaps dividing the units of the form. This meaning making, admittedly, is controlled to some extent by the author and in other, potentially unanticipated ways by the reader; however, the prospective to make meaning and create connections across the narrative and ontological gulfs that separate us provides additional incentives to explore further means of increasing compassionate practices in the face of death. Morpheus chooses to leave the Dreaming to meet his obligation to Nuala, leaving it defenseless to the onslaught of the Ladies; he also welcomes Death earlier than necessary in order to preserve what is left of the Dreaming and its inhabitants. Morpheus's final conversation with Death is worth quoting in whole:

Morpheus: Had I remained in the Dreaming, the Kindly Ones could have done no damage to me directly, nor been able to do anything irreparable to the Dreaming. No one was hurt I could not have restored. But I was forced to leave the Dreaming—

Death: Don't you start blaming Nuala for this. You didn't have to leave. You didn't have to do anything.

Morpheus: No... You are right, of course... It has nothing to do with Nuala. It has everything to do with me. Since I killed my son [Orpheus]... the Dreaming has not been the same...or perhaps I was no longer the same. I still had my

obligations... but even the freedom of the Dreaming can be a kind of cage, my sister.

Death: Destruction simply left. Took down his sigil, said he wasn't responsible for the realm anymore, that it was no longer his affair, and took off into the forever. You could have done that.

Morpheus: No. I could not.

Death (after a pause): No. You couldn't, could you? Well... what are we going to do with you?

Morpheus: They are destroying the Dreaming. What else can we do? I have made all the necessary preparations.

Death: Hmph. You've been making them for ages. You just didn't let yourself know that was what you were doing.

Morpheus: If you say so.

Death: Dream? Give me your hand. ("The Kindly Ones: Part 13")

Morpheus takes his newfound awareness of others and synthesizes it with his feelings of responsibility for the Dreaming, creating a new narrative that prepares him, not without apprehensions, for death.

Meanwhile, the apparent iconic simplicity of the content within the panels of this chapter mirrors the dependence on the 2 x 3 format throughout the chapter. Returning to McCloud's ideas regarding the "realistic" to iconic representation of figures one can see how the highly stylized, cartoony technique chosen for this part of the story resonates. "Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing! The ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally.... The

more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). “The Kindly Ones” brings a number of themes together as the penultimate chapter of *The Sandman*. Family, tragedy, humanity, narrative, sacrifice, and love are all brought to bear.



Figure 5

This highly iconic style of the panels offering a glimpse at the last communion (see Figure 5) between Morpheus and his sister provide a greater range for the transmission of these themes. This style both admits and welcomes the claims of subjectivity. That subjectivity is unavoidable as ineffability allows for nothing else. In these final moments of his life, Morpheus has chosen a particular

narrative that honors commitment, responsibility, and compassion above all else, including death. In fact these choices provide him with the necessary tools to confront death on his terms, mitigating the potential harm of others. The image, likewise, leans on gaunt iconography. Other than color, the background is done away with; thin, slashing lines stand in for rainfall; Morpheus consists of angular and jagged blocks of white partially hidden by shadow and resolute resignation; and Death is a mop of wet, black hair framing her concern, sadness, and love for her brother.

CONCLUSION

Morpheus’s dialogues with his sister Death, in “The Sound of Her Wings” and the final chapter of “The Kindly Ones” are depicted across a spectrum of iconic possibility that combine

to present the growth and understanding undergone by Morpheus, specifically in his regard for other people and a willingness to accept a contingent, unknowing perspective. Karen Armstrong, affirming the potency available in the embrace of apophatism and compassion within religious narratives, writes,

They have always desired to integrate with their daily lives the moments of rapture and insight that came to them in dreams, in their contemplation of nature, and in their intercourse with one another and with the animal world.... They tried to honor the ineffable mystery they sensed in each human being and create societies that protected and welcomed the stranger, the alien, the poor, and the oppressed. (329)

Armstrong's work focuses on how the religious, throughout history, have attempted to meet the problem of death as Ernest Becker described it, to integrate unknowing, contingency, and compassion. Once Morpheus dies, Daniel Hall receives the mantle of Dream and, again graphically, presents the reader with a physical manifestation of the way in which narratives can be re-assessed and negotiated to sift out the harmful, myopic elements of the old stories that result in manifestations of evil. Daniel disposes of Morpheus's ruby and black garb and clothes himself in white with an emerald as a symbol of his power.

Comics do not require art styles that privilege the iconic to connect or resonate with their audience, despite McCloud's general observations. At times it can be equally as important to emphasize "realism" and the alienation that can come with alterity. Neil Gaiman's embrace of the formal characteristics of comics goes so far as to account for the commercial demands of monthly comic book publishing by integrating the individuality of varying artists into the telling of his story. Taking care to examine the graphic elements—layouts, at the panel, page, and

album level; pencils; inks; coloring, etc.—of comics works will complicate and enrich more superficial readings. Indeed, to fail to account for the collaborative relationship between the iconic and linguistic elements of a comic will betray any other reading.



Figure 6

The panel depicting Morpheus's death provides a concise, powerful coda to the integration of Armstrong's compassionate, apophatic ethos to Becker's denial of death dilemma. In an overt allusion to Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam," Gaiman flips the panel ninety degrees in a move calculated to invest the pregnant moment before Morpheus's death with the intimacy and significance that such an event deserves. The rotation of the image pointedly disallows the possibility of reading death as a mere symmetry or mirror of birth. Death is no bookend, but a singular event that must be prepared for, mediated by, and reflected on through stories. Morpheus's Dream, aptly then, dies in the embrace of story and death.

In conclusion, I argue that greater critical attention should be given to Neil Gaiman's works (Tara Prescott and Aaron Drucker's *Death, Desire, Fury, and Delirium: Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman*, scheduled for release in March 2012, promises to be an excellent selection). The theological sophistication of Neil Gaiman's works in particular, and the potential of the comics medium in general, justifies this attention. A number of the formal characteristics of comics works, such as fragmentation, delimitation, and iconic representation, provide areas of investigation particularly relevant to the fractured nature of the postmodern world. I have suggested a rich critical paradigm capable of application to other comics writers and artists of the genre, such as Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely's *All-Star*

Superman or Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*. I began with Ernest Becker and Karen Armstrong and pointing out how the terror of death leads to the creation of narratives designed to accommodate and control that terror, and how the revision of those stories according to apophatic and compassionate principles portends a mitigation of evil. It is now apparent that despite the post-Enlightenment triumph of secularism, resulting in the near eclipse of formal religion and theology by the late-nineteenth-century, popular literature, as well as *belle lettres*, continues to wrestle with the big recurring questions with which Becker and Armstrong wrestle, like God, death, transcendence, etc., are also relevant to the readers of comics and other popular art forms. *The Sandman* and Neil Gaiman meet that readerly desire of the contemporary moment in the valorization of a search for meaning in the face of death.

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