

***Sandman*, Aesthetics and Canonisation**

Today I want to examine the ways in which Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* has used narrative, format and aesthetic to move ever closer to the notion of the literary text. Particularly going to consider how it exploits the author function and enacts the struggle for cultural worth that comics seem consistently engaged in.

Sandman is an epic series rewriting a golden-age superhero into an immortal deity. It is best remembered for its mythological content and literary references, and these elements have allowed it to claim its place as a canonised graphic novel (despite not actually being a singular GN but a maxi-series across multiple trade paperbacks!). Neil Gaiman's authorship and authority dominate the text and epitomise Michel Foucault's author function.

But *Sandman* also draws heavily on mixed media and artistic variation and these aspects are less often discussed. Far from supporting a singular author function, *Sandman*'s visual style is multiple and varied. But despite this, in paratexts the artistic contributions are frequently subsumed into Gaiman's authorship. However, a closer reading demonstrates that in fact this artistic variety destabilises clear-cut authorship and enacts the particular status struggles of comics as a collaborative medium struggling against the graphic novel branding.

SLIDE: literary pix

Sandman was launched in 1989 and became the flagship title for DC's new Vertigo imprint. Vertigo's publications contributed heavily to the mainstream cultural reevaluation of comics as graphic novels, and critics such as Candace West have argued that *Sandman* in particular was instrumental here due to the attention the series received from mainstream media such as *Rolling Stone* magazine.

The collection of the *Sandman* stories into distinct arcs, often bookended by short epilogues and prologues, also prompts Maaheen Ahmed (69) to claim that QUOTE 'The difference between these issues and the chapters in a novel is small' and Titan artist/editor Steve White (2005) echoes this from the creator perspective, pointing towards QUOTE the 'attitude among creators that they're writing for the trade paperback [...] it has actually changed the way the comics are written.'

As well as its bookish structure, during the narrative Gaiman brings in multiple religious mythologies (Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Christian, Pagan and many more) and literary allusions (for example, Shakespeare and Chaucer both appear, alongside characters such as Puck). *Sandman* won Gaiman four Eisner awards

and, controversially, the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction for the MSND issue (#19).

SLIDE: literary quotes

Following on from Alan Moore's work, *Sandman* is thus considered emblematic of the 'British Invasion' – a term often used to evaluate the changes that took place in the American comics industry in the 1980s.

Chris Murray (2010) quips that the 'Brit invasion was also a Lit invasion' and Steve White also claims the UK writers were able to take that 'step away from spandex' by providing critical distance and bringing in QUOTE 'classical [themes], Shakespearean and mythological themes' (2005).

Most visibly, DC Vertigo editor Karen Berger described this change in comics to me as 'totally writer-led' and acknowledges the debt due to Alan Moore in stretching the potential of the medium as used by the mainstream publishers – comparing the resulting comics to prose fiction and claiming a new 'respectability'.

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As well as this critical distance, Vertigo had an aesthetic distance from DC's other titles. No DC bullet logo appeared on the covers of the monthly releases and *Sandman's* covers in particular were conceptual and often surreal. Later collected editions further emphasise literary status: for example the 'Absolute Sandman' editions of 'oversized, archival-quality books with bonus features and retouched or recoloured art' and, most recently, the Sandman Omnibus editions, which come in two volumes of over 1000 pages each. Again, the aesthetic is self-consciously bibliophilic, with leather-like covers in black and red.

SLIDE: Gaiman criticism

Similarly, the vast majority of *Sandman* scholarship to date has honed in on the series' literary qualities, such as Gaiman's use of allusion, metaphor and overwriting. Entire issues of academic journals and many edited collections have now focused on his work.

For example, Stephen Rauch and Peter S. Rawlik Jr and many others have analysed *Sandman* with respect to Joseph Campbell's hero archetype. William Alexander has considered Irish lore and legend in connection with *Sandman*. Nick Katsiadas describes *Sandman* as QUOTE 'a series that invokes English Romanticism' [and] bring[s] to the fore the series' relationship with the European literary canon' suggesting we can read both Gaiman and Morpheus as Romantic authors (SiC 6 (1) p61-84) qt. p61.

Clay Smith also argues that we can read Gaiman as his titular protagonist – but with more negative consequences. Smith points out the dominance of Gaiman’s author function and the way it is rearticulated and emphasised in interviews with his collaborators and artists. He cites colorist Daniel Vozzo as saying: QUOTE "If he [Gaiman] doesn't agree with or like something, he'll let you know it, which is fine. And then you change it because he is the man." (McCabe 190). Smith also draws attention to the use of Gaiman’s name as owner and validator of anthologies such as *The Sandman: Book of Dreams*, arguing that QUOTE ‘his author(ity) manifests itself throughout the entire work in implicit and explicit ways’ (Smith)

SLIDE: Gaiman author function

So what does it mean to be an author? Foucault’s discussion of the meanings attached to this label can be broken down into these four parts and we can see that Gaiman fits all of them. His style is consistent across all the media he works in: strongly narrated and generally rewriting mythology, fairytale and literature and devising fantasy worlds. His ideology too remains similar: employing and extolling the power of fantasy, and drawing on notions of romantic authorship and heroism or questing. He himself most certainly exists as a clearly recognizable figure. The standard or quality of his work also remains consistently erudite: whether it’s children’s literature or non-fiction his writing is clearly literary with frequent reference to established fairytale and myth.

Smith asserts that Gaiman’s constant use of citations, quotations and references to other authors QUOTE ‘demonstrate[s] his command of *authors/others* – specifically by incorporating them into the body of his work and (re)authoring them.’ The way in which Gaiman flags up his usage of literary figures and quotations asserts his ownership. To borrow Gaiman’s own image from *Sandman*, he himself becomes the ‘vortex’ of narrativity from which his readers cannot (and do not want to) escape.

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While I agree with Smith’s observations about Gaiman’s absorption of other writers, I think the conclusion is more complicated than he suggests. I argue in my book (2014: 158) that Gaiman’s overwriting of characters is an act of gothic absorption that also foregrounds the artificial nature of the author function and concepts of literary ownership. For example his reuse of characters such as Cain and Abel, who were first biblical characters, then hosts of the *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets* anthologies, then featured in Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*, and finally incorporated into *Sandman* as characters in *The Dreaming*. Do these

characters belong to the writers who first created them and worked on the 1970s DC anthologies, or has Alan Moore's rewriting now absorbed them into his *oeuvre*, or Gaiman's into his? This reuse even extends to the reprinting of specific pages, as we can see here – do these extracts then remain part of their original appearance, or become part of the later narrative, particularly if we consider that their meaning has been altered by being absorbed? Such questions exemplify Foucault's interrogation of the author function as a restrictive category that represents just one way of classifying texts and should be challenged.

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It is this argument that I want to extend today by exploring *Sandman's* visual elements. After demonstrating how the comic's art also foregrounds and problematizes the author function, I then want to push this a step further and concluding by reinterpreting *Sandman's* themes and aesthetic as an example of what Christopher Pizzino names 'autoclasm' – an enactment of the status struggles against the graphic novel label that comics continue to undergo.

Critics such as Smith, Beaty and Woo all draw attention to the way in which comics criticism frequently overlooks the artist.

Alongside haptic elements (like the hardcover formats I have already mentioned), *Sandman's* art has also played a significant part in its canonisation, but is often ignored or assimilated under Gaiman's name.

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Dave McKean's unique and memorable collage covers are the most visible art associated with *Sandman*. They dominate over the title's logo, which in one recent cover from *Sandman Overture* (shown here) is 'almost blown off the [page]'. They've been used to provide legitimation for *Sandman* spin-offs such as *The Dreaming* and have also been collected and memorialised in multiple editions as shown here.

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But alongside the variety offered by McKean's conceptual and surrealist art, there were also numerous artists working on the *Sandman* stories who brought their own style to individual story arcs or single issues. This matched the diversity of the comic's content and raised its critical profile still further. While McKean did all the covers and Todd Klein was letterer throughout, the artistic team varied for each story arc, and even each issue, and included: Sam Kieth, Mike Dringenberg, Jill Thompson, Shawn McManus, Marc Hempel, Michael Zulli, Malcolm Jones III, Chris Bachalo, Steve Parkhouse, Robbie Busch, Kelley Jones, Charles Vess, Colleen Doran, Steve Oliff, Matt Wagner, Dick Giordano, George Pratt, P. Craig Russell, Danny Vozzo, Shawn McManus, Bryan Talbot, Stan Woch, John Watkiss, Duncan

Eagleson, Kent Williams, Mark Buckingham, Vince Locke, Lovern Kindzierski/Digital Chameleon, Michael Allred, Gary Amaro, Tony Harris, Steve Leialoha, Shea Anton Pensa, Alec Stevens, John Watkiss, Marc Hempel, Richard Case, D'Israeli, Teddy Kristiansen, Glyn Dillon, Dean Ormston, Kevin Nowlan and John Muth. (And we're not just talking about guest appearances, a lot of these artists drew, inked or coloured multiple issues or entire arcs.)

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What seems significant here is that these artists were deliberately selected for their very different characteristics, for example Gaiman says of Marc Hempel, whose style is quite art deco and angular and shown on the left here, QUOTE 'I wanted a sense of form. I wanted a sense of everything reducing to light and shadow, of everything reducing to simple shape.' (McCabe p6). Danny Vozzo's flat and bold colours emphasise this. By contrast, Michael Zulli's coloured pencils for *The Wake* have no inked lines and create an ethereal look for this story arc.

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Of course with multiple names attached the author function becomes, quite paradoxically, both foregrounded and undermined, in a way that seems particular to comics, where long-running series will publicise a particular writer or artist's run while also seeking to maintain narrative coherence. In *Sandman*, although each artist has a distinct style, they also play with a vast variety of influences and techniques that often take them beyond their own era. For example, Kelley Jones used styles including 19th c. Japanese woodcuts and Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings as well as drawing on the work of Audrey Beardsley and August Doré in his work on *Seasons of Mist*. (Clay Smith).

Standard and reception also becomes quite varied, most obviously evidenced by the reception of TKO. Hempel's style and Vozzo's colouring initially received mixed reactions from readers perhaps because the monthly publishing schedule allowed them time to forget and thus some found it 'artificial' and 'distancing'. However Gaiman claims that QUOTE 'With *The Kindly Ones* story collected in a book, you're in there and it may be distancing for the first couple of pages but as it goes on, you are in *that world*.' P6. Again the collected, more book-like format is cited as essential to the artwork's success (and vice versa)

So we can see that diversity is used as a defining trait of Sandman's art.

This brings me to *Sandman Overture*.

SLIDE - Overture

After *Sandman* ended in 1996 a selection of spin-off series and one-shots were produced, but not until nearly 25 years after the series first began (1989 / 2013 = 24 years), did Gaiman return to the title with *Sandman: Overture*.

Straight away, it's obvious that the hardcover format, glossy pages and the language used about this text seek to elevate it to literary status: *Sandman: Zero* was rejected as a potential title in favour of *Overture*, which of course carries connotations of elitism, opera and so forth. The introduction and other paratextual materials in this collected edition are entitled 'Composing and performing', again reinforcing the metaphor.

This six-issue mini series is written by Gaiman with art by JHW3 and colour by Dave Stewart. I want to argue that these artists' holistic and organic processes extend and develop *Sandman's* mixed media approach and continue to problematize the author function in the same manner as the multiple artists who worked on the original *Sandman*.

Williams has always experimented, from his co-owned series *Chase* in the 1990s to later work on *Starman* and *Promethea* and *Batwoman*. This varied and experimental style continues in *Sandman: Overture* and, I would argue, is used to signal connections with the previous series and to reinforce its literary weight while sustaining its variety. The number of covers released for the miniseries also emphasise this notion – issue #1 had 9 different covers, shown here (the rest had around 6 or 7, most drawn or recoloured by JHW3 with one for each issue by McKean).

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A quick skip through (and going much faster than these pages deserve) gives us a wide range of different styles and techniques.

So we have... Dizzying double-page spreads that play with use of perspective as befits the cosmic level of this story.

[JHW on perspective?]

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And images and layouts which signal the content as fantastical, but also weighty and literary, as you can see here (where not just the image of the book, but also the sheer weight of narration on the left hand side both dominate the page).

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It also, as we might expect, plays with the conventions of the medium, e.g. using panel borders to indicate a particular character's viewpoint on the story, as in

these pages on the left here which are narrated by a dream character named 'George Portcullis'. Within this we see characteristic play of the medium, for example the switch to what I would call the embodied viewpoint of the Corinthian character in the second panel of the second page, as we look out through his teeth/eyes.

Borders and layout are also matched to the theme of the page – so the plant-based characters that open the narrative (here on the top right) are enclosed with organic-looking lines: there are no straight lines on this page aside from the narrative boxes.

Other panel borders are also both ornamental and functional – such as the Corinthian's teeth/eyes on this doublepage spread (bottom right), which again echo the threatening content of the panels.

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Later pages contain a similar sense of unification of form/content, for example this page where the flower motif provides the panel borders. Again, as befits Delirium's shaky grasp on reality, there are no right angles or straight lines.

Dave Stewart's comments on colour included in the Deluxe Edition relate specifically to this page, as when asked about his favourite colour he responds 'Q They're all my babies. How can I choose?' But he continues that he privileges colour combos over original colours Q 'Certain rusty red, yellow green, and mustard yellow hues in combination make me pretty happy'. So even the paratexts about this comic emphasise its multiplicity – Stewart cannot choose one colour, just as *Sandman's* art cannot be singular!

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Similarly in Chapter 5, Night's realm is not just appropriately coloured but the layout of the page as a whole reinforces the flowing, seductive air. Panels blossom from a central shape that seems quite sexually resonant, and align with the lines of Night's body, for example her arm in the bottom right quadrant. *Roads and pathways also provide borders as in the top right. The whole is both organic and surreal, as the flat pink colours used for borders and the character herself offer no sense of realism.*

JHW3 describes his process as equally organic and holistic, saying his choice of style comes 'from my gut' and that he knows when a page is 'When it's at the point that if I add anything more it will be overwrought, becoming ruined and a drag.' – in a sense, working back from the whole to reach this conclusion.

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Later pages also disrupt our expectations of normality and reality, for example by requiring us to change reading direction. This forces us to interact with the book physically by turning it in our hands to continue reading, as in these pages – a dizzying experience but one that simultaneously reminds us of the object we are holding (and of course severely disadvantages those non-bibliophilic readers who might have bought a digital copy).

The double page on the right also reminds us of the object through its warped diamond-shaped panels, which again play with perspective and expectations of a two-dimensional square border.

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At other points, the medium again reminds us of its presence, for example by using what I call ‘false panels’ here, laid over a single page image and allowing for the repetition of characters as they move between instances – often called the ‘De Luca’ effect.

Of course, these are not new strategies, popularised in *Sandman* the first time round and used in many other titles.

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However other elements are brand new: letterer Todd Klein produced over fifty different character and caption styles for *Overture*, using non-standard lettering for all of the Sandman pantheon whose typeface and speech balloon tails are all different. This is of course a continuation of the technique Klein used in the original *Sandman*, where Morpheus’s speech always appeared black. Back then this was achieved by hand: the speech was hand-lettered, printed in negative, cut out by hand, and then pasted over the artwork. For *Overture* Klein achieved this digitally, which also allowed him to merge the text and art still further by using translucent lettering and transparent balloons where it suited the story.

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The merging of text and image is also apparent in the title pages to each chapter, which incorporate these labels into the artwork. Again, this uses a range of different styles and media to suit the mood, for example the lack of inks and coloured pencils used in Chapter 4 here to convey the City of the Stars – ‘a city made of light’, which led JHW3 to decide not to use any black whatsoever.

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These contrasting styles extend out to rest of comic – for example as in this double page from issue 4, which brings together a range of contrasting styles and techniques.

As colourist Dave Stewart comments Q ‘Some of the stuff we’re doing requires a new technical approach.’

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As Andy Khouri’s review points out: Q ‘There’s some stuff that’s hand-painted, some stuff done in washes, some stuff that’s only pencil that’s been colored [[Dave Stewart](#)].’

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Finally, the mighty gateway pages (creating a 4-page spread) that appear at the beginning and end of the mini-series.

Within this page we can also see the contrasting styles of different Sandmen, some of which specifically echo the original series (such as the full moon head), although the majority are utterly new! Perspective is also used to emphasise this (2-dimensional character at centre-left and another towards the top right). Scale is also used – the hands of a giant *Sandman* character are shown on the right hand side). Visibility and colour also play a role, for example via the translucency of the black ghost-like shape to the centre right and the bursts of flame which break up the many shades of blue used on this page.

The gateway pages again bring in haptic issues as we literally expand the space of the page – just as the *Sandman* himself has been expanded.

The opulent and varied aesthetic and the gatefold device screams quality and innovation. Critics hailed *Overture* as ‘stunning’, ‘amazing’ and ‘well written’ (Bailey) and ‘truly beautiful’. But there was also criticism: as reviewer Dan Nadel argues that the elaborate art Q ‘stifles actual engagement’ and that Gaiman’s level of control Q ‘actually works against his premise.’ Here Nadel echoes Clay Smith by finding both Gaiman’s authority and the opulent art problematic.

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With this in mind, and rather than concluding with a recap, I’d like to end by reframing this paper’s observations in terms of some recent work that has been done on comics and legitimation and offer a suggestion for further exploration.

Jean-Paul Gabilliet and Paul Lopes have done significant work on the historical legitimation of comics. Gabilliet’s cultural history looks at the structuring social

and economic relationships that have defined the development of comics publishing. *He considers both internal and external types of consecration and how these contribute to the visibility, recognition, and cultural legitimacy of comics.* In summarising, he points out that while the graphic novel format has shifted comics towards the field of adult culture, the inertia of the monthly market has simultaneously trapped the medium as part of adolescent culture. I find this particularly interesting in the context of Charles Hatfield's work on narrative tensions and my own work that identifies similar internal contradictions shared between comics and the Gothic.

David Ball's work on Chris Ware's comics also notes a similar technique: that he names 'comics against themselves' – the tendency to bring in high-minded literary themes while simultaneously undoing them (Pizzino 68). [I personally understand this as the type of process we see in shows like South Park where an intellectual point is paired with a gross analogy]. Again, a contradictory impulse seems present in the medium. The tendency of comics to be self-referential is also noted by Esther Szep in an article entitled 'Metacomics' in which she argues that comics are, first and foremost, about being comics and argues for them to be defined as a rhetorical mode.

Most recently, Christopher Pizzino's book *Arresting Development* seeks to develop this body of criticism by using the notion of legitimation as a tool to read the comics page. He defines and argues for a process called 'autoclasm' (or 'self-breaking') – a split energy that articulates comics' status problems in comics-specific terms on the page.

Essentially Pizzino argues that the 'coming of age' bildungsroman narrative continually applied to comics in the mainstream media is a fiction. The fact that this same 'news' is still being reported year after year is indicative of what remains as an ongoing struggle for legitimation (since such articles have been published for 30 years now as 'new news', and show no signs of stopping). This is also apparent in comics paratexts and scholarship, where critics often engage in doublethink by positioning a 'great' comic as the exception to the rule (just as Karen Berger did in the quote earlier discussing Alan Moore), and using the language of cinema or prose to analyse it (32).

Pizzino argues that the 'signs of these struggles can be read on the comics page' (2), which demonstrate a split energy that articulates comics' status problems. He offers four case studies, that include reading TDKR through the language of the comics code (*and particularly the accusations of Frederic Wertham which are re-voiced through its psychiatrist figure*), and Alison Bechdel's Fun Home as articulating the disruptive pleasure that comics offer. *Charles Burns' Black Hole*

demonstrates the abjection and exclusion that comics fans can feel; and Hernandez Bros' Love and Rockets reframes the violence directed at comics by articulating trauma and suffering on many different levels. He also gives multiple other throwaway examples, such as Hill and Rodriguez's Locke and Key, in which parents forget the actions they took as children, as representative of the pressure on the comic reader to eventually forget and throwaway these childish things.

Using this model I'd suggest that Sandman's incorporation of literary references can be read as an example of autoclasm. Gaiman's incorporation of an abundance of literary references performs the literary or intertextual play of high-low culture, representing comics' ongoing struggles with the graphic novel label.

Fitting Pizzino's model, this is done via a method that is typically 'of comics' – Gaiman uses retroactive continuity, but pushed to the nth degree. He overwrites other literary texts and historical events (such as Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the sleeping sickness that did indeed appear between 1915 and 1926), explaining them away as a consequence of the events of his narrative.

In addition, his combination of diverse mythologies and literatures demonstrates the same type of cross-fertilisation that the mainstream comics universes have created (where multiple characters inhabit the same universe).

Finally, the dramatically varied art produced by his collaborators also enacts the multiplicity of comics art more generally, where pencillers, inkers, colourists and letterers collaborate on a single text. This is even sustained within the work of singular artists such as Dave McKean or JHW3 through their use of collage and mixed methods.

So I hope that this analysis of *Sandman* has not only drawn attention to the role of its artists in creating a sense of literariness, but also suggested a possible interpretation of this series as an example of autoclasm. We do comics a great disservice when we focus exclusively on their writerly authorship, as in *Sandman* both the words and art create worth and quality, and also demonstrate the particular status struggle of the collaborative comics medium against the graphic novel label.