

20th century comics have used embedded stories to problematise the boundaries between fiction and reality.

The nature of the comics medium is ideally suited to this narrative strategy.

A gothic process that undermines authenticity and diegetic boundaries

Paper in 3 parts:

Hosts that break boundaries

Problematizing real people

Absorbing previous characters: creating embedded stories at a metalevel

No comics theory – though some basic narrative terminology – diegesis (story world) and associated terms such as intradiegetic (within the world) and extradiegetic (outside it). As dealing with embedded stories will also refer to diegetic layers.

Hosts that break boundaries...

Your average comics reader today probably knows C&A best from Neil Gaiman's Sandman series where they are inhabitants of the Dreaming, but they are (like many comics chars) much older. They first appeared as hosts of the DC Comics horror anthology series *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*, where they introduce and bookend tales, and also sometime hosts of the interestingly named horror/comedy anthology *Plop!* These were all collections published by DC in the wake of the Comics Code. While their post-Code content seems tame, both anthologies draw on the traditions of pre-Code horror by incorporating a host figure.

SLIDE: EC and Cain

Cain was introduced to H of M in issue #175 (1968). Cain would welcome readers to each issue and introduce the individual stories until the cancellation of this run in 1983. He addresses the reader directly ("Welcome fellow tenants..." (#175)), generally appearing in the title and final panels of each story, as well as offering occasional commentary and (sometimes) participating in the story itself. His brother Abel performed a similar function for *House of Secrets*, beginning with issue 81 in 1969. The characters would host their respective comics until the cancellation of these runs in the late 70s/early 80s (*House of Mystery* 1951-1983; *House of Secrets* 1969-1978).

The hosts look back to the EC horror comics of the 1950s (the GhouLunatics: the Crypt Keeper, the Vault Keeper and the Old Witch) and often employ many of the same-style puns and humour, such as “Tomb it may concern” or “Goodbye and good mourning” (as Cain says *House of Mystery* #255), or “hair today, gone tomorrow” (as Abel says in *House of Secrets* #111). The *House of...* anthologies published O. Henry stories with supernatural content and twist endings, just like the EC comics, and the host figures offer similar puns and commentary.

For example, Cain’s first appearance here introduces himself as “the able caretaker”. The pun makes the connection to the biblical figure, even though “my dumb brother *Abel!*” is not explicitly referenced until #182 (1969) in “House of Secrets Promo”, again by Joe Orlando.

Both character’s language supports this interpretation – Abel ‘Pay attention Little Fiends’ – evokes ‘Boils and Ghouls’ of the EC hosts

SLIDE: House of Secrets Promo

On this page, in which Cain introduces new sister title *House of Secrets*, he breaks a number of narrative conventions of the comics medium. The page itself has an interesting layout that uses the visual strengths of comics. It’s mirrored vertically, with a single wide panel in the top and bottom rows, and a central row of two circular panels. The top row contains a bleed between the two “panels”, allowing for Cain to be repeated – or doubled – in the same space as he first addresses the reader and then turns to look out of the window. Panel borders are broken by both Cain and his two monstrous companions, whose feet invade the space of the second row. The switch to circular panels (looking through Cain’s binoculars) is both ornamental and functional: it draws attention to the middle row, the shown content of which (Abel’s house) is the subject of this page. The page, as a promo, gives a lot of visual information, and subversive relationships between word and image make up part of this excess, for example in the juxtaposition of Cain’s gargoyle with his unthreatening name (“Gregory”) and status as a “pet”. Cain’s final words are similarly subversive, working against the shown content of the page as he tells the reader that *House of Secrets* will “be on sale in August! Don’t buy it!”

The circular panels at the centre of the page indicate that the reader is being assigned an embodied perspective of an intradiegetic character (i.e. one within the story world) – that is, the view through Cain’s binoculars. Existing alongside this shift of perspective from outside to inside the story is the direct address of the reader in both word (“Well, well, well...you finally made it here. Come on over to this window...”) and image (the first and last panels in which Cain breaks the fourth wall to gaze straight at us). These strategies all work together to immerse the reader in the page and create an intriguing sense of the uncanny, supported further by the presence of gargoyles, graveyards and the mysterious House of Secrets – little more than a silhouette, as befits its name.

Cain’s appearance, then, complicates visual narrative conventions through doubling, breaking panel borders and breaking the fourth wall. The comics medium in the 70s is flexible enough to allow this. It also supports embedded stories by its very nature and Cain and Abel’s variable positioning within these comics adds layers to stories and characters. This echoes the textual strategies used by gothic texts such as *Frankenstein*, which contains multiple framed narratives (Walton’s letter to his sister retells the story told to him by Victor Frankenstein; Frankenstein’s story contains the creature’s story; and the creature’s story contains the story of the DeLaceys).

SLIDE: Waiting

Throughout the *House of...* anthologies, textual boundaries are problematized by the existence of the host characters in a variety of ways. Firstly, Cain and Abel’s presence disrupts the boundary between text and paratext, as story title pages become part of a diegetic experience and the titles themselves are woven into spoken sentences as for example in the title page from “Waiting...Waiting...Waiting...” (*House of Secrets* #103, Mayer and Rival 1972). This combines images of Abel and the story characters into a single page and leaves it unclear who is speaking the title words. Incorporating titles into speech and diegetic images into the cover problematizes both.

SLIDE: Little Fiends!

In addition, the hosts sometimes interject comments midway through stories, sometimes for just a single panel (see for example “Winner Take All!”, *House of Secrets* #107, Skeates and Baily 1973) and it is not always clear if they exist within a story’s diegesis or not. For example, in “Voice from the Dead” (*House of Mystery* #185, Anon. and Howard 1970) the

last but one panel of the story has Cain standing in the graveyard that opened the diegesis, holding an inset panel in his hand while addressing the reader directly. Although shown “in” the diegesis he is obviously not part of the tale.

SLIDE Graveyard

Cain appears similarly in “Grave Results” (#182, Wolfman and Howard 1969): after introducing the story from outside the diegesis (where his speech again blurs the boundaries by including the story’s title), at its close he joins a crowd of villagers within the story, looking over his shoulder to address the reader directly with a characteristic pun.

SLIDE: Red fox

However other times the hosts participate explicitly in the story’s events, for example “Mask of the Red Fox” (*House of Mystery* #186, Kanigher and Toth 1970). Here, the sound of a foxhunt interrupts Cain’s introduction and, after conversation with the hunters, he reveals to the reader the fox he has kept hidden from them, apparently either behind a door or perhaps even in the page’s gutter, ie the gap between the panels. Cain also claims to have found his pet gargoyle, Gregory, on the floor of a room within the story “The House of Gargoyles” (*House of Mystery* #175) and Gregory reappears in various later issues at the host level (such as *House of Mystery* #182). The boundaries between diegetic levels, text and paratext, and the extra/intradiegetic status of characters are thus transgressed, complicating notions of storytelling.

SLIDE Problematizing ‘real’ people

Appearances of real people are also used in these comics to complicate storytelling. For example in “His Name is Kane!” (*House of Mystery* #180, Friedrich and Kane 1969) a self-important Gill Kane (the artist for this story) annoys the editors for the last time and ends up trapped in his own artwork. Puns and satirical commentary are used to intelligent effect here (“*I’m being drawn into my own artwork!*” (Friedrich and Kane 1969: 1)) and Kane is horrified to later realise “My artwork has become a *factory* – little assistants doing the pencilling and inking and coloring!” (4)

Slide: Kane

These pages also play with diegetic layers and the boundaries between text and paratext. The plot of the story is that Kane rents a room in the House of Mystery to try and work on

his own comic strip rather than the “hack job” the editors want him to write. However he is interrupted by a caricature of editor Joe Orlando (with large glasses and quiff) demanding his story, and kills him (in a series of panels littered with eyeballs and repeated, duplicated images). After he does so, the tale’s narration which throughout has addressed itself to Kane in the second person (“You’ve had a long night, Gill Kane...” (1)) is revealed to be the editors’ voices (“You have broken the divine right of editors – and for that *we shall have our revenge!*” (5)). This shift aids in the merging of diegetic layers by incorporating extradiegetic narration into the diegetic action. At the tale’s end, after Gill Kane has been sucked into his own artwork, the host Cain enters the room and discovers the picture Gill Kane is trapped in, which he frames and hangs on the wall of “Room 13” (also the name of this section of the comic). Here, diegetic levels are blurred by the role of the host, and the house itself (and Room 13) exist at both a textual and paratextual level.

SLIDE: Berger and house of mystery

Other editors, writers and artists would also appear in the anthologies’ pages in later years, including DC Vertigo visionary Karen Berger. *House of Mystery* was the first book Karen Berger edited at DC. She describes her run on this title as: “the germs of what Vertigo became [...] using horror as a backdrop to tell stories about people in the world” (Round 2008b). Her mention of ‘the world’ hints at the way in which fiction and reality and starting to blur in comics of this time.

Berger took over the editorship of *House of Mystery* with #292 (1981), an occasion marked by metafiction, as she appears in this issue, introducing herself as “*Karen Berger, your new editor, reporting as requested, Cain! Want a cookie?*” Len Wein (creator of *Swamp Thing* and previous editor of *House of Mystery*) also appears in this issue, being kicked out of the house by Cain who shouts “– and take your stupid stuffed *teddy bears* with you, Wein!” The anthology’s metafictional tendencies and the intrusive role of the host are thus both maintained here, and it was these sensibilities, along with a focus on horror and embedded storytelling, that Berger would fashion into the shape of Vertigo. Berger appears again at various points in the *House of Mystery* series, including its final issue (#323, 1983) where she takes Cain into the DC offices and explains that his house needs to be demolished, causing him to metafictionally ponder his existence.

SLIDE: Absorbing previous characters - covers

As well as recreating real people, existing fictional characters are also dragged into the comics world. While it has been stated that Cain, Abel and Eve are not the same characters as their biblical counterparts (this is claimed by Destiny, the host of *Weird Mystery Tales*, in the letters page of issue #3, 1972), subsequent rewritings from creators such as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman would go on to absorb these versions too. When Alan Moore incorporated Cain and Abel into *Saga of the Swamp Thing* in issue #33 entitled “Abandoned Houses” (1987) their comics origins were flagged in both title and cover, as you can see here.

SLIDE: Swamp Thing pages

Within the issue they appear to protagonist Abby in a dream and offer her a “mystery” or “secret” (see p20 on the right here). The tale Abel then tells her is a reprint of pages from *House of Secrets* #92 (1956), and Moore uses visual indicators that are both ornamental and functional (such as the shattering of a mirror into panels as Abby first begins to fall into her dream) to divide his own framing pages from the reprinted story and explicitly flag up his use of these characters and their origins as storytelling devices.

He also references the biblical archetypes explicitly; after killing his brother again as part of an endless cycle, Cain explains “I’m being punished for being the first *predator*... and *he*’s being punished for being the first *victim*” (p19 on the left). Moore’s rewriting both looks backwards to these previous versions, but also forwards as he redefines both characters and houses as storytellers accessible through dreams.

He also absorbs both the biblical figures and the host characters into iterations of a wider archetype (the first murderer and the first victim).

SLIDE: DC Vertigo

These archetypes are picked up by Neil Gaiman in the phenomenally successful *Sandman* series that was DC Vertigo’s flagship title. In *Sandman* Gaiman follows a similar strategy to Moore’s work comics titles and characters into his comic. Moore’s revival of Mick Moran in *Marvelman/Miracleman* hinged on the discovery that the original 1970s Marvelman adventures were in fact deliberate hallucinations created by Dr Gargaunza while Moran and his companions languished in a government laboratory. In Moore’s *Saga of the Swamp Thing* Alec Holland was revealed to be just the latest in a long line of ‘plant elementals’ and

the identities of previous versions (such as Alex Olsen and Albert Hollerer, the Heap) were embedded within his story.

Similarly, in *Sandman* Gaiman absorbs the golden-age Sandman superhero into his fiction, as he explains his activities as a consequence of the capture of his protagonist Dream, saying: “*Wesley Dodd’s* nightmares have *stopped* since he started going *out* at night” (#1, Gaiman et al 1991: 18). Cain and Abel’s appearance as storytellers resident in the Dreaming has a similar function, implying that their previous stories were “told” from The Dreaming.

They’re introduced by Gaiman in *Sandman* #2 (flagged up with the title “Abandoned Houses”) and this appearance absorbs all their previous incarnations. Both Moore and Gaiman reference the *House of...* anthologies paratextually through covers and titles. By situating the characters in The Dreaming as storytellers. Gaiman’s construction of the storyworld of the Dreaming also takes in Moore’s use of them as figures in Abby’s dream. Like Moore, Gaiman continues the biblical references as Cain repeatedly kills Abel, and also uses motifs from the 1970s horror comics such as Abel’s stutter and Cain’s pet gargoyle Gregory. Gaiman’s Lucifer character also cites the Bible, which states that, after killing his brother, Cain went to live in the “Land of Nod”. When Bill Willingham and Matthew Sturges revived *House of Mystery* for Vertigo again in 2008, the plot began with Cain attempting to return to his home in The Dreaming.

The references even continue at a metatextual level – outside the comics entirely – as DC writer Mike Carey comments “Vertigo is the house that Karen built” (Rogers 2012) and, in a personal interview, Berger herself describes Vertigo’s beginnings in relation to two just key texts: DC’s *House of Mystery* and Alan Moore’s run on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (1985-1996).

SLIDE: conclusion

These acts of absorption thus become embedded within each other and all versions of the characters are recontextualized in order to remain coherent with each other. Character elements are taken from diverse and contradictory sources (from the Bible to EC Comics), which suggests to me that this process can be defined as Gothic.

Jerrold Hogle argues that Gothic revolves around a “blurring of metaphysical, natural, religious, class, economic, marketing, generic, stylistic, and moral lines” (2002: 8-9) and is continually about confrontations between low and high, even as definitions and ideologies of these change. As such, he claims Gothic is abject as it breaks down borders between genres and disrupts definitions of “high” and “low”. Peter Otto (2013) also stresses that gothic absorption is not limited to self-consciously gothic or horror texts and goes on to list a variety of voices, including eighteenth-century theorists of the sublime, Shakespeare, Milton, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, and various myths and popular ballads. While many of the Vertigo texts use absorption (and the launch of the brand was based explicitly on this notion, with its initial six titles being rewritten versions of older series), a blurring of high and low references is particularly apparent in *Sandman* (and later Vertigo titles such as *Fables* and *The Unwritten*).

This process of absorption explicitly problematizes notions of “the book” and the creator’s *oeuvre* (or collection of work) in a Foucauldian sense. Do Cain and Abel belong to the writers who 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? Are the reprinted pages from the that are included in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #33 properly part of that book, or do they remain part of the *House of Secrets* #92, particularly if we consider that their meaning has been altered by being absorbed into Moore’s story? Such questions exemplify Michel Foucault’s interrogation of the author function as a restrictive category that represents just one way of looking at/classifying texts and should be challenged. These comics also demonstrate how interpretation is fully dependent on the reader’s knowledge and experience and is thus variable at different points in time, enacting the processes of the archive.

Absorption within comics and particularly the Vertigo universe is bidirectional, atemporal and gothic as characters and stories become subsumed in other works with reciprocal effects on both: creating embedded stories at a metalevel.

Archive - This is a technical term Foucault uses in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It designates the collection of all material traces left behind by a particular historical period and culture. In examining these traces one can deduce the **historical a priori** of the period and then if one is looking at **science**, one can deduce the **episteme** of the period. None of these concepts has predictive value - they are all descriptions of limited historical orders.

Episteme - This term, which Foucault introduces in his book *The Order of Things*, refers to the orderly 'unconscious' structures underlying the production of scientific knowledge in a particular time and place. It is the 'epistemological field' which forms the conditions of possibility for knowledge in a given time and place. It has often been compared to T.S Kuhn's notion of paradigm.