

EPISODES
&
THEMES

THE ORIGINS OF *THE SANDMAN*

by B. Keith Murphy



It is considered by many to be the paragon of the comic-book form. It's mentioned in the same breath with such comic icons as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. It is studied as literature on college campuses and, years after the last new issue hit the stands, the collected volumes of the comic are still among DC Comics' best-selling titles. It is Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*.

The Sandman provided new life and a new sensibility to the comic book. Yet it owes a great deal to both literature and comic forms that preceded it. This essay is an attempt to trace the cultural history of *The Sandman* from the original gothic horror traditions to comic books that aspire to literary traditions far beyond that of the standard superhero fare.

Any genre of literature develops a set of generic expectations, a kind of unspoken set of rules that define what is acceptable and expected in that genre. Those shared expectations create a sense of community between readers.

You see, we comics fans share a very special language all our own. We talk about continuity, meta-humans, and indicias, things most people have never heard of. Comics possess their own charming logic that is vastly different from the real world's — so different, in fact, that many of us quite often retreat from the real world into the “logic” of comics. (Eury)

This world of characters and jargon and narrative expectations creates a linguistic community of readers who share a language and a world view. By its very success as a medium, the commercial, “mainstream” comic book in America reached a pivotal point where generations of new artists and writers, raised on the comic-book narrative form, merely repeated the themes, forms, and ideas with which they had been raised. As such, many of the American costumed superheroes became cultural icons through the repetition of these successful forms. Unfortunately, this also meant that the American comic-book form, by the late 1970s, had become little more than a parody of itself.

Much of that changed thanks to the infusion of British talent that made up the initial waves of the British horror comic invasion. Interestingly enough, the roots of that invasion dates back to the earliest Gothic novels.

A HISTORY OF THE FUTURE. Horror is defined as a fictional narrative “which shocks or even frightens the reader, and/or perhaps induces a feeling of repulsion or loathing. The word *horror* derives from the Latin *horrere* ‘to make the hair stand on end, tremble, shudder.’” The horror story can trace its beginning to the Gothic novel, which saw its heyday from 1760 to approximately 1820. The generic trappings of the Gothic novel can still be seen in modern ghost and horror novels, films, and comics.

Most Gothic novels are tales of mystery and horror, intended to chill the spine and curdle the blood. They contain a strong element of the supernatural and have all or most of the now familiar topography, sites, props, presences and happenings ... The whole apparatus, in fact that has kept the cinema and much third-rate fiction going for years, is to be found in these tales. (Cuddon 406)

The elements include a brooding but attractive nobleman; dark family secrets; a quivering heroine; a vast, crumbling castle that's not as empty as it looks; and ominous supernatural portents.

The seminal Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which still survives in print. The genre peaked with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) but was more popularly represented by mountains of cheaply produced, quickly written formulaic works (Cuddon 382). By the early 18th century, British readers had tired of Gothic horror, turning

instead to novels in which more fully developed characters such as Jane Eyre encountered situations that were outré but not quite macabre. Meanwhile, the Gothic had traveled to America, where

... Charles Brockden Brown attained something approaching fame with a succession of Gothic romances ... Brown was to influence Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary Shelley and Edgar Allen Poe — one of the most Gothic of all 19th c. writers of short stories whose long term contribution to the horror story, the tale of suspense and mystery and detective story was immeasurable. (Cuddon 381-2)

Early in the 20th century, the Gothic in America drifted into a rowdier vein of horror explored in pulp magazines, where action and tight plotting were more important than subtle characterization or polished prose. The most literate, *Weird Tales*, kept grotesque mutilations to a relative minimum and sometimes, as in the work of Anglophile writer H. P. Lovecraft, achieved the level of art. In “The Outsider,” for example, Lovecraft used Gothic horror conventions to present a first-person narrator who is as unjustly but absolutely excluded from human society as was Frankenstein’s monster. All of the less restrained components of the Gothic and horror stories would, in time, travel back to Britain to reappear in a particular form of British popular fiction: Penny Dreadfuls.

PENNY BLOODS. In England’s Victorian era, penny fiction represented the state of the art of illustrated stories. “Bound in paper and cheaply printed. A penny, from the cost; dreadful, presumably because they were regarded as low, vulgar, sensational, etc.” (Cuddon 696). These books were the “Victorian equivalent of the horror comic” (Perry and Aldridge 38). The Penny Dreadful followed the deeds of a primary character, usually a well-known and notorious individual: “Highwaymen and notorious criminals were popular characters, ... [including] many fictionalized accounts of Dick Turpin, Jack Rann, Jack Sheppard, and Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street” (“The Barry Ono collection”). The Penny Dreadful was characterized by its sensational art and a format which emulated more traditional news sources of the day.

A sensational cover drawing was always required, for publishers were already well aware of the value of point-of-sale display in raising circulation. *The Illustrated Police News* [a popular penny dreadful which chronicled the misadventures of Spring-Heel’d Jack] had a bogus air of respectability, mocking the sober *Illustrated London News* in style. It was, however, a magnificent opportunity for the presentation of scandal and sensation, put across with the Victorian penchant for retribution and punishment

indulged to the full. (Perry and Aldridge 38)

As a result, even as far back as the Victorian era, newspapers were generally barren of illustrative material, and books which incorporated pictures into storytelling were considered “less than respectable.”

In 1890, Alfred Harmsworth’s Amalgamated Press introduced *Comic Cuts* and *Chips* in an attempt to gain a foothold in the penny market; “he wanted to break into a market dominated by the penny dreadful, with its sensational serials and crude drawings. But his publication was to be priced at a halfpenny — and later A. A. Milne was to say that Harmsworth ‘killed the penny dreadful with the ha’penny dreadfuler’” (Perry and Aldridge 47-8).

Because of the lack of a pool of British artists and writers, *Comic Cuts* (and contemporaries such as *Chips*) included a great deal of work “lifted” and adapted from American comic strips. *Comic Cuts*, which consisted of gag strips interspersed with jokes, lasted over sixty-five years. The mass marketing of these periodicals established the form of the comic genre in Great Britain.

With the birth of the American comic book a few years later, the British and American comic strip/book genres began to develop in separate directions. Until World War II, the British comic industry continued to produce primarily humor books while America had first discovered the superhero, then rediscovered the horror comic.

THE YANKS ARE COMING. Until the 1930s, the American comic-book industry was also dominated by reprints of daily strips from newspapers. In 1933, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster provided DC Comics with the formula that would make the American comic-book industry extremely profitable and influential for the next six decades. That formula was the superhero genre, and it was typified by its first major character: Superman (Daniels 20). The superhero is an apparently ordinary man or woman who reveals extraordinary abilities by donning a dramatic costume to assist the less able/competent authorities in protecting civilians. By World War II, the comic book and its superhero genre had become a staple of American culture — so much so that comics were provided to American troops serving overseas during and after the war. These American imports soon exposed the British to a new and exotic form of literature

which first arrived in Britain in any numbers with the GIs stationed there towards the end of the Second World War. These comics came from a tradition of publishing very different from that previously known in Britain, and were primarily aimed at adults. In the early days, they were directly imported in bulk, with titles such as *Eerie*, *Crime Detective*, *Crimes by Women* and, of course, *Superman*. (Barker 8)

“The Origins of *The Sandman*”



During the latter part of this initial wave of American comic books into Britain, one American publishing house began producing books which echoed the British traditions of the horror genre but maintained a more rambunctious American style and sensibility: Educational Comics (later Entertaining Comics, or simply EC) Comics. The EC titles told highly literate tales (some were even adaptations of Ray Bradbury stories) with all the trappings of the gothic genre. The American addition to the genre came as a result of EC’s unblinking point of view:

EC had pioneered a new kind of horror comic based not in myth and fantasy but in the banal horrors that, just maybe, could be taking place behind the closed doors of any business or suburban home. These powerfully illustrated melodramas especially appealed to adolescents and young adults who may not have read other, milder comics ... The value system apparent in [writer/editor Al] Feldstein’s scripts was one that had no shadings of gray, no ambiguity. Good people were totally good and evil people were irredeemable, consistently evil. (Goulart 178)

Beginning in April, 1950, EC debuted *Crypt of Terror* and *The Vault of Horror*, these titles were soon followed by *The Haunt of Fear*, *Weird Science*, and *Weird Fantasy*. EC’s early publications are “what many consider the supreme works of the Golden Age of comic books” (Inge 117). EC had been founded by William Gaines, the son of Max Gaines (originator of many of the second tier of DC heroes including Flash, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman) who, in 1941,

convinced of the need to fashion the right products for their youthful readership began publishing *Picture Stories from the Bible*. In 1945 he [Max] sold the other titles (the superheroes) to National [DC], and began his own firm Educational Comics, Inc. There he continued *Picture Stories from the Bible*, adding *Picture Stories of Science*, *Picture Stories from American History*, and *Picture Stories from World History*. (White 31)

Needless to say, none of the titles created by Max made any money. When Max was killed in a boating accident a few years later, William took an interest in the company and began creating a stable of titles that would change the face of comic books on two continents.

Among innovations the EC staff brought into comic book art were the use of highly literate and stylistically effective narrative captions, realistic dialogue which permitted characters to use blasphemy (though without obscenity or cursing), and engaging plotlines which always concluded



with an ironic twist or a surprise ending, and some of the most distinctive visual effects ever produced for the pages of comic books. Here was creativity of the first order, an inspired blending of the visual and literary media possible only when artists and writers are free to pursue their own standards of excellence. (Inge 117)

In the United States, the EC titles were financially successful. They were equally successful in Britain. The EC books led the vanguard of the second wave of American books to hit British soil. “By 1954 a new set of comics was being reprinted, deriving from a later development in the US industry: the horror comics. Although presaged in *Eerie* and the like, these were different. *Black Magic*, *Frankenstein*, *Haunt of Fear* and *Tales from the Crypt* [the latter two titles from EC] now graced many a newsagents’ shelves or market stalls” (Barker 8).

The books were eagerly received by British youth. A physician, who would later be a vocal opponent of American-style comics, reported that young patients of his hospital were frequently seen trading the books from bed to bed. The appearance of these comics sparked a firestorm of public reaction; “the conservative government, late in 1954, introduced a bill to control them. Known as the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act, it became law in 1955. Within weeks, virtually all these comics disappeared. ... The Act ... was renewed without discussion in 1965. It is still in force” (Barker 9, 17).

Thus, the Harmful Publications Act was intended to isolate the British comic industry and its audience from the overwhelming majority of American comics and their influence. As a result, juvenile humor books such as *Beano* and *Dandy* became the British standard. This isolation, in combination with the anti-horror comic furor, negatively impacted the image of comic books in Britain:

In Britain, however, they [comics] were still generally regarded as junk: fodder for the illiterate and uneducated. There was persisting residue from the puritan past that regarded enjoyment without effort as worthless, and for that reason visual perception in popular culture forms traditionally took second place to the written word. Put another way, it was alright to read, but not to look at pictures. (Perry and Aldridge 7)

Despite this, the British comic-book industry, led by *Beano* and *Dandy*, developed its own subversive traditions.

They represented a new type of comic, powerful in gag humor and slapstick, with a stubborn scorn for the higher virtues. The cartoon heroes in *Film Fun* had to turn out to be good natured at heart if only to keep within the libel laws. But no such scruples could possibly affect the cow-pie eat-

ing, steer-tossing tough guy Desperate Dan in *Dandy*, or the authority-hating Lord Snooty of *Beano*. Schoolteachers, policemen, officials of any kind were usually figures of ridicule to be thwarted at every opportunity. (Perry and Aldridge 51)

This change in approach marked a clear departure from the American comic vision. Where American superhero comics were generally morality plays in which the hero represented the virtue of authority, their British counterparts, like the American underground comics phenomenon of the 1960s, championed the common man as an anti-authoritarian force.

This dichotomy is equally evident in the typically British takes on the American superhero genre with such titles as *Captain Marvel*, later called *Marvelman* (*Miracleman* in the United States), and *Judge Dredd*. The most American, at the beginning, was *Marvelman*, yet all of the British titles retained a certain disdain for authority figures. As a result, the titles were financial successes.

While superhero comics crashed in America after World War II, their English counterparts sold briskly. On August 19, 1953, Miller and Son launched weekly versions of *Captain Marvel* and *Captain Marvel Jr.* with glossy color covers and 32 page black and white interiors. Their success was immediate; the titles rapidly became Miller’s best sellers demanding approximately 256 pages of material monthly. (Gore)

Marvelman (the name was changed after National sued Fawcett for copyright infringement) and his compatriots became the reading staple of avid comic-book readers in Britain. The changes that were made initially to protect the publisher from litigation continued to mold *Marvelman* into a purely British book until the book ceased publication in 1963. The most “British” of those changes rested in the fact that the series’ tone was very different than the serious face presented in American superhero fare. “The tone of the *Marvelman* strip was quite whimsical and relaxed. His many adventures were low key and his menaces perhaps less frightening than most of his American contemporaries” (Humphreys).

Marvelman’s importance to the British comic-book readers of the day is reinforced by the fact that it was reborn in the British comics revival of the 1980s. In 1982, Quality Comics revived *Marvelman* in the pages of *Warrior* in an acclaimed series penned by Alan Moore. Moore’s genius lent itself well to the task. His reworking of the powerful character’s silly Golden Age origins revealed them to be a government experiment in super power and mind control. Unfortunately, after 21 issues, pressure from Marvel Comics succeeded where National’s victory over Fawcett failed. *Warrior* dropped *Marvelman*. In 1985, however, Quality exported *Marvelman* to the United States as *Miracleman*. This run from Eclipse comics con-

tinued sporadically into the early-1990s with new material by Neil Gaiman. *Marvelman's* success led, in part, to the advent of Judge Dredd and Dan Dare, the first purely British heroes (Murphy). Dredd, Marvelman, and Dare remained something uniquely “other” than their American counterparts. As such Marvelman, Dredd, and Dare are important influences on the creators who would follow (Holland). From these influences, as well as the long British tradition of more literate, character-driven horror fiction, the beast began to stagger from the swamp.

LIKE HAMLET COVERED IN SNOT. The first shot of this British invasion was fired by a very unlikely hero: Alan Moore. Moore, born in 1953 in Northampton, was raised in relative poverty and was expelled from a conservative secondary school before he graduated. By 1971 he was untrained and unemployed when he began working for *Embryo*, a magazine founded by some of his friends. By the late 1970s he was freelancing as a writer for *Dr. Who Weekly* and *2000 A.D.* Moore's work began to get industry-wide notice when, in both 1982 and 1983, he won the British Eagle Award for Best Comics Writer (“Alan Moore Fan Site”).

Len Wein, co-creator and editor of DC's *Swamp Thing*, solicited scripts from Moore. Moore says, “I believe I was just about the first British writer brought into American comics” (Daniels 161). Moore was paired with renowned artist Steve Bissette and inker John Totleben.

The team of Moore, Bissette, and Totleben took flight at once. “We found out all we wanted to do the same thing with the character,” says Bissette. “Alan immediately kicked it into gear with issue 21, ‘The Anatomy Lesson.’ I had never read a comic script like that in my life.” Moore's inspiration, presented in unusually evocative prose, ... [was] a purposeful plant with strong ecological opinions, not the suffering scientist he describes as “a little bit like Hamlet covered in snot” (Daniels 161). [Fig. 1]

He also could be described as slime-dripping version of Bronte heroes such as Heathcliff or Mr. Rochester. In any event, Moore's *Swamp Thing* is frequently cited as the first book in what would become DC's immensely popular, predominantly British-created Vertigo line of “sophisticated suspense.” “Moore's *Swamp Thing* broke the mold of clichéd superhero comics and the perceived restrictions of the books, opening the envelope wide for all writers to diversify the comic universe” (“The Top 100” 62).

Moore found the “mold” of American comics easier to break than had those raised on them because, as with Gaiman, British writers' exposure to the books and their generic expectations/restrictions was limited, whereas American children who were inclined to become comic-book creators had been inundated with the powerful imagery and storytelling of the Silver Age of American Comics. American popular culture at this time, especially that



Fig. 1: Writer: Alan Moore Artists: Steve Bissette & John Totleben "Swamped"
 Collected in *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* [©1983 DC Comics]

targeted at the young, was rife with the simple redemptive violence fantasies purveyed by both Marvel and DC comics. The big two comic publishing houses flourished in the wake of Stan Lee's re-invigoration of the comic medium with his work at Marvel. In the meantime, television had discovered the superhero and increased saturation level of this narrative form. Youngsters simply could not grow up in America in the mid-'60s through the mid-'70s without being very familiar with the superhero and all for which he stood.

Swamp Thing soon ran into trouble with the American version of the Harmful Publications Act, the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The CCA began to object to images and themes that were appearing in the books. "DC soon decided that the quality of *Swamp Thing* justified its continued publication without interference from the Comics Code. The label "Mature Readers" was eventually affixed, and the way was opened for an entire line of sophisticated comic books" (Daniels 161).

Karen Berger, who was to become editor of the Vertigo line of books credits Moore with laying the foundation for the eventual boom of British horror comics in the U.S.: "I think Alan was the first writer in mainstream comics who was writing for adults. ... He was writing a horror comic, but one with lots of humanity and soul" (Daniels 161).

Moore continued breaking the barriers of the genre when, in 1986, DC published *Watchmen*. *Watchmen* won nationwide notice and was reviewed in most national periodicals and newspapers.

In *Watchmen* Moore posits the existence of costumed superheroes in the real world ... subtexts of the genre that stand revealed when placed in a realistic setting: the role of violence in determining a hero's purpose, the sexual energy overtly exhibited while simultaneously (even paradoxically) sublimated, the profound changes wrought upon a world by the existence of even a single super-powered being, etc. While doing so, Moore frustrates expectations at every turn, playing by the genre's rules only to the point where he can gain the most insight by altering the expected outcome. (Tice 50)

Although disguised as a superhero comic, *Watchmen's* characters, motifs, and themes are all clearly taken from the Gothic horror genre. *Watchmen's* plot centers around an unspeakable beast that has the power to destroy humanity. The main characters included a madman (Rorschach), a man whose humanity was destroyed by science (Dr. Manhattan), and a character who is a clear reference to the Jekyll/Hyde archetype (Ozymandius). Twisted around the primary plot, in a complementary plot that is a nod to both *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and EC Comics, is a tale of shipwrecked pirates who must fend off sharks and cannibalism. As a twelve-issue miniseries *Watchmen* pushed the development of the comic book in a new direction. "In its moral and structural complexity, *Watchmen* is the equivalent of a novel, and

it remains a major event in the evolution of comic books“(Daniels 197).

ENTER DREAM. As a result of the success of *Swamp Thing*, DC president Jenette Kahn appointed Karen Berger DC’s British liaison. Berger immediately hired freelance writer and former journalist Neil Gaiman to write a miniseries revamping DC’s little known Silver Age heroine, Black Orchid. As a result, Neil Gaiman had achieved his childhood dream and had the opening to reshape the face of the comic book.

Writing American comic books was Gaiman’s childhood goal, much to the distress of his school’s career adviser. “He said, ‘Well, how do you go about doing that, then?’ And I said, ‘You’re the careers adviser, you tell me.’ And there was a long pause and at the end of it he said, ‘Have you ever thought about accountancy?’ And I said, ‘No, I have never thought about accountancy.’ And then we sat there staring at each other and I said, ‘Shall I send the next boy in?’ And he said, ‘Yes, you may as well.’ As far as careers advice and planning goes, that was mine.”

Fascinated as he was by American comics, Gaiman “never wanted to do the things that people had been doing with them,” he said. “The problem with a lot of American comics writers is that they’ve grown up reading comics and nothing else.” Gaiman set his sights higher. (Covert)

One of the reasons that Gaiman’s sights are higher than those of his contemporaries is that he was a voracious reader as a young man. As Gaiman explains, “I was a reader. My parents would frisk me before family events. Before weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs, and what have you. Because if they didn’t, then the book would be hidden inside some pocket or other and as soon as whatever it was got underway I’d be found in a corner. That was who I was — that was what I did. I was the kid with the book” (White).

Gaiman claims that his early reading habits were critical to his development as an author because

books encountered in childhood serve as the richest compost for whatever an author creates as an adult. He read H.P. Lovecraft, Michael Moorcock, T.H. White. (His children read Gaiman, which is a bit scary.) There is in his work, and even in his speaking voice, a kind of once-upon-a-time rhythm of enchantment; if he is not, perhaps, the most effective poet, the poetry of the fable lives in his prose. (Sutton)

Gaiman also admits being influenced by such authors as C.S. Lewis, Samuel R. Delaney, Harlan Ellison, and Roger Zelazny (Austin). Gaiman’s reading background schooled him in

the rich literary traditions of (primarily) British authors whose work challenged the reader by treating them as intellectual equals rather than patronizing the readership as does some popular culture. The work of the authors, and the narrative expectations of the British comics Gaiman read shaped his work into a form that was more literate, more intelligent, and distinctly British. As a result, Gaiman's work has always been more than the standard comic-book fare created by his American contemporaries. Where American comics tend to feature one-dimensional characters in shallow plots where violence trumps intelligence — and, if recent trends at publishers like Image hold true, images trump words, Gaiman's work reflects the literary tradition in that the characters are more fully developed and the plots are rife with meaning and symbolism.

Gaiman's unique vision was brought to comics courtesy of Alan Moore. Gaiman had been handpicked by Moore to replace him in Britain as the writer of *Marvelman*, and Gaiman credits Moore with leading him to comics: "What got me into comics was very much Alan Moore. The work he did for DC during the 1980s took comics places they had never gone before" (Daniels 206). As Gaiman told interviewer Brian Hibbs,

because it was a medium that I loved. I'd read comics extensively as a kid, and wanted to write comics as a teenager. I drifted away in the late seventies when there was very little interesting to read. I would occasionally pick up and flip through a comic, then put it back down in disgust. Then one day in early '84 (or very late '83) I was on Victoria Station in London and they had a pile of comics at the newsagents, including *Swamp Thing*. It was a title that I had loved as a kid, so I picked it up, thumbed through it, and thought, "hang on, this is literate, this is really interesting." But by this point I had a very deeply ingrained prejudice against comics, and put it back down. Over the next month or so I'd pick up the *Swamp Things*, flip through them, and put them back down again. And finally, I think it was *Swamp Thing* #28, I bought it and took it home with me, and that was that. I'd discovered Alan Moore, discovered what he was doing. I realized you could do work in comics that was as every bit as mature, and interesting, and exciting, as anything that was being done in mainstream fiction or in modern horror literature. It was like coming back to an old lover, and discovering that she was still beautiful. (Hibbs)

Gaiman and artist Dave McKean immediately picked up the renaissance where Moore had left off:

In this tale [*Black Orchid*], something unanticipated happens. The man who has caught Black Orchid stands before her and says, "Hey, you know

something? I’ve read the comics ... I’m not going to lock you up in the basement before interrogating you ... then leave you alone to escape. That stuff is so dumb. But you know what I am going to do? I *am* going to kill you. *Now.*” And then he does just what he has promised: He kills her — the woman who is the namesake of this book — in a brutal and unflinching manner. It is a startling moment ... because, in those moments when the killer tells Black Orchid that he understands how the rules of the super hero genre work, he isn’t merely addressing an endangered heroine of a comic book drama: He is also addressing the readers of that genre in ways that we have rarely been addressed before. In effect, in this one moment the killer is a stand-in voice for the writer of this tale, Neil Gaiman, and he is informing us all that the familiar rules of comic book storytelling — all those rules that insure the hard-earned triumph and inevitability of justice — will not apply in this narrative. Enter this story, the author is saying, and you enter a place where all the accepted customs of the genre’s mythology have been suspended, and a new mythology — much closer to the dark dreams and darker realities of modern-day life — is about to be constructed. In other words, we are not only at the beginning of a new story, we are at the beginning of a new *way* of telling such a story. (Gilmore)

While Gaiman was working on *Black Orchid*, DC began to get cold feet about investing so much in a book headlined by a female character. So Gaiman and Berger discussed their options. Gaiman characterized the discussion in this manner:

When Karen asked what I wanted to do next, I had suggested a *Sandman* graphic novel, featuring the old Simon and Kirby 1970s incarnation because there were a few things that I thought were really interesting. I liked the idea of a character who lived in dreams, who had no objective existence. So, later, she said, “Well what about that Sandman idea?” I said, Okay. She said, “Great, but make it a new one...” So I sat around for a few days just thinking. Trying to put together a character who could exist in the DC universe, which is what they wanted, and who would satisfy me. The kind of character I’d like to read about. Who could exist in a book that wouldn’t be a “monster of the month” book. It wouldn’t be a superhero book. It wouldn’t be predictable. It would just go off wherever it wanted to go off, so I could write whatever sort of stories I wanted to write. So I figured I should just reduce it to the basics, and what I got when I reduced it to the basics was Dream. (Amado)

Gaiman's re-interpretation of the book was thorough:

Now, the original Sandman, in the late thirties and forties, was a kind of Batman Lite. Millionaire Wesley Dodds, at night, would put on gas mask, fedora, and cape, hunt down bad guys, and zap them with his gas gun, leaving them to sleep until the cops picked them up the next morning — hardly the stuff of legend. So what Gaiman did was jettison virtually everything except the title. The Sandman — childhood's fairy who comes to put you to sleep, the bringer of dreams, the Lord of Dreams, the Prince of Stories — indisputably the stuff of legend. (McConnell)

It is in those first few issues of *The Sandman* that it becomes evident that Gaiman is not playing by the same rules as anyone else. In fact, he's not even operating in the same horror universe as anyone else. One of the most poignant changes early on is his ability to take flat stock characters from the DC universe and turn them into fully rounded characters that become critical to the overall narrative he is spinning. A prime example of this are the characters of Cain and Abel, once relegated to the minor role of introducing DC's horror anthology *House of Secrets*. Gaiman takes the pair and, in the space of a few panels, makes the reader care about them and their continued plight. Gaiman does this by tying these characters to one of the strongest mythic structures in the horror genre: the light/dark allegory. While this is a simple metaphor to abuse, Gaiman utilizes it so deftly that instead of merely asking the audience to despise the evil Cain, Gaiman leaves the reader in a more literate, complicated space of pitying both Cain and Abel. [Fig. 2]

Gaiman also stays true to his Gothic horror roots. His realm of dreams and the waking world are both filled with monsters of all sorts including some very human monsters. Terror lurks in every shadow and something growls beneath every bed. What sets Gaiman's work apart from the mountains of schlock is that he is entering a relationship with the reader. Instead of being a "monster of the month" book, Gaiman's work utilizes the tropes and motifs of the Gothic horror genre. Gaiman himself admits to consciously adapting his work to the strictures of this genre:

There was a definite effort on my part, in the stories in this volume [*Preludes and Nocturnes* which collects issues 1-8] to explore the genres available: "The Sleep of the Just" was intended to be a classical English horror story; "Imperfect Hosts" plays with some of the conventions of the old DC and EC horror comics (and the hosts thereof); "Dream a Little Dream of Me" is a slightly more contemporary British horror story; "A Hope in Hell" harks back to the kind of dark fantasy found in *Unknown* in



Fig. 2: Writer: Neil Gaiman Artists: Sam Keith & Mike Dringenberg "Imperfect Hosts" Collected in *The Sandman: Preludes & Nocturnes* [©1995 DC Comics]

the 1940s; ... (Gaiman)

In the first few issues of the series, Gaiman utilizes motifs such as the *ubi sunt* theme, a favorite of the Graveyard School of poets, which laments the transitory nature of life. (Murfin and Ray 412) He also provides readers with a rich tapestry of such gothic horror elements as the focus on decay (both architectural and physical), the supernatural, and the grotesque. Yet he does this in a very literate manner, relying as much on creating horror in the blank space between comic panels, and thus in the reader's mind, as he does on the artist's work within the panels themselves to flesh out the horror created by Gaiman's use of language. Gaiman respects the reader's intelligence, and he tests the very limits of that intelligence.

Gaiman's creation was, clearly, not from the mold of the spandex-clad heroes that made up the bulk of DC's production. In fact, *The Sandman* was such a departure from the norm that Gaiman expected a short life for his creation: "The biggest thing that I actually hoped for was to become a mild critical success. Bear in mind that this is 1987, when a critical success and a commercial failure were synonymous. I had sort of planned this huge, arching epic, but what I also expected was that we would be cancelled right off" (Savlov). Gaiman says that, when the book was not canceled, it financially came into its own with issue number eight: "I was very surprised when 'round about issue eight we were selling more than any horror comic had ever sold. I mean we were selling more than *Swamp Thing* had ever sold. We were selling more than any comic of that kind in the previous five years had sold, and that was astonishing" (Vaughn 58-9).

He also says that issue eight marked the point when he began to find his own voice as a writer:

Just doing a story in which the Sandman and Death wandered around New York, and nothing happened ... I don't know. It was probably the first "Neil Gaiman" story. The other seven, you know, they're very competent, but you can look at them and you can see where they came from. You can see me doing Alan Moore, you can see me doing various other things. I think issue eight was the first issue that started to sound like me. (Vaughn 59)

What does a Gaiman story sound like? To begin with, it assumes the reader is intelligent. "I wanted to write a comic for intelligent people. I don't understand why people write down. Who are they writing down to?" (Daniels 206). Bryan Talbot, who worked on a number of issues of *Sandman*, points to the intelligent writing as the key to the book's success:

In earlier publishing, where 95% of the titles concerned one guy in tights hitting another guy in tights, it definitely brought intelligence. It wasn't

“*The Origins of The Sandman*”



the only one to do that, but I think that was one of the main things it did ... Neil created something new. That’s quite a big thing in comics. It was something that nobody’s done in the comic form before. The character was very different than any other character in comics. The whole sort of world that Neil created to go with it was quite unique. (Vaughn 64)

DC’s Executive Editor [at the time], Dick Giordano, describes Gaiman’s contribution to comics as a “writer’s vision” (Vaughn 65). Giordano says that it is this writer’s vision that led to the book’s success:

Because it was offbeat, because the writer’s viewpoint never changed. Because he dealt with whatever subject matter tickled his fancy for that moment so that, unlike most superhero books where you pretty much have a pretty good idea what this new storyline is going to be about after you have read the first four or five pages, you really couldn’t tell with a Neil Gaiman story where it was going. Sometimes Neil didn’t know where it was going. (Vaughn 65)

Giordano argues that Gaiman’s writer’s vision brought about not only more intelligent books but brought an entirely new audience into comic-book shops:

We have a considerable amount of proof that the people who buy most of her [Karen Berger’s Vertigo line] books, especially *Sandman*, don’t buy other comic books. [They] aren’t regular comic book readers who happen to get off on the *Sandman*, but people who went to get *Sandman* because they heard about it and they hadn’t been buying comics before. (Vaughn 65)

After seventy-five issues, *The Sandman* has become a comics legend. How great is the legend? Well, Robert Wilonsky tried to sum it up in a mid-2000 issue of the *Dallas Observer*:

Not long ago, a journalist asked Neil Gaiman how he feels about the fact that, despite his large body of work — novels, comics, children’s books, short stories, and so forth — he will be remembered solely for *Sandman*. Gaiman sneers at the question, but it’s not an entirely unfair one, and he knows it. After all, *Sandman* was a hit almost from the moment the first issue, *Preludes & Nocturnes*, reached the stands in December 1988. Even now, its bound collections — 10 in all — continue to rank among the best sellers in DC Comics’ adult-oriented Vertigo offshoot, of which *Sandman* was the charter member.



The series spawned gushing praise: Norman Mailer wrote that it was a “comic strip for intellectuals, and it’s about time.” Tori Amos, whose songs often reference Gaiman, treats *The Endless* — the family of timeless gods who personify such forces as Death, Destiny, Desire, and, of course, Dreams — as though they exist in this world. (“On bad days I talk to Death constantly,” she wrote in the introduction to 1994’s collection *Death: The High Cost of Living*.) The title won more awards than are given for comics; it was treated, in fact, like literature, as though it were too special to be included among the panels-and-balloons riffraff. In September, DC will publish the paperback version of *The Sandman Companion*, a nearly 300-page book that explains every panel; no comic book ever received such elucidation. (Wilonsky)

The Sandman proved to be a unique and groundbreaking voice in the comic-book industry.

Gaiman’s landmark contribution is “Sandman.” It is one of the greatest stories in the history of the medium in terms of size (2,500 pages and 2 million words) and sophistication. The intricately interconnected tales concern Morpheus, lord of dreams, as he visits historical characters, mythical deities and creatures of his creator’s prodigious imagination. Those include a hack named William Shakespeare who makes a dreadful bargain for genius; a man determined to live forever; the disembodied head of Orpheus begging for the release of death, a writer who keeps his battered muse locked in the attic and a murderers’ convention whose guest of honor consumes his victims’ eyes. (Covert)

In the wake of *Swamp Thing* and *The Sandman*, the Vertigo line has seen such British creators as Garth Ennis and Grant Morrison found wildly popular titles. And now, American writers and creators who were raised on *Swamp Thing* and *Sandman*, like Steven T. Seagle, have begun producing Americanized versions of the British horror-comic form. Each of these “second generation” horror-comic creators are producing works that are highly literate and true to their gothic horror roots.

CONCLUSION. The development of the modern horror-comic genre owes a great deal to the cross-pollination of literary culture between Britain and America. From its earliest incarnation as a Penny Dreadful, to the Silver Age peak of the EC Horror Comics and their British reprints, to the modern line of Vertigo Horror comics, this genre has taken roots and formats from British literary tradition, applied a certain amount of American packaging and formalization, and created an art form that exceeds the sum of its parts.