Dreaming of Comics Neil Gaiman's Sandman, the Unconscious, and the Comic Book as Literature

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Comics – A Brief History

1890s – single panel newspaper cartoons

1930s – repackaged newspaper cartoons/strips in special booklets.

Superman (1938) - first superhero in a multi-page narrative book.

1940s – superheroes boom in WWII but bust after Horror and crime comics flourish

1960s – Silver Age, second superhero boom Neil Gaiman reads his first comic book (Thor), which is Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's attempt to fold classical mythology into the world of superheroes.
1970s – Horror and superhero comics flourish Underground comix, an adult-oriented alternative

Comics – A Brief History

1980s – Superhero Revision Era (Swamp Thing, Watchmen, Dark Knight Returns) Rise of the Literary Comic (MAUS) Major effort to legitimize mainstream/ superhero comics

> The Sandman is Gaiman's contribution Gaiman's attempt to fold superheroes and comics into philosophy, religion, fantasy, myth, history, and psychology—the stuff of literature.

WHY GO THROUGH SO MUCH TROUBLE FOR COMICS?

What makes comics special?

- A truly unique literary form
- Image and text in the same space
- More than illustration or illumination
 - image and text are not just complementing each other
 - they are fused because they are telling the same story
- Image and text cannot be taken on their own in the comic form.

Sequential Art – Will Eisner

- "a montage of both word and image"
- Panels and pages contain the montage and are arranged in sequence.
- Sequence can be anywhere from 2 panels to a 500 page graphic novel.

Sequential Art – Will Eisner

The methods of art

The methods of literature

Are SUPERIMPOSED upon each other

You must change the way you read.

TEXTUAL

- Metaphor, Punctuation,
- Rhyme etc.

ABSTRACT

- Theme
- Genre
- Symbol
- Social/Historical concept
- Historical Event
- Character Voice
- Point of View

LITERATURE

VISUAL

• Line

• Shadow

ART

- Perspective
- Colour vs. Black & White
- Shading Technique (stippling, scumbling, crosshatching)
- Colour/Drawing method (oils, ink pen, pencil, watercolour, digital)

Symbiosis of Word and Image

- When the methods of art begin to play off and feed the methods of literature and vice versa
- Ex:
 - A metaphor in the text can speak to the colour in an image.
 - The theme of the story can influence the type of line the artist employs.
- Image and text are in constant communication with each other.

Hillary Chute – Comic Narrative

- "two narrative tracks":
 - Visual image
 - Verbal text
- "register temporality spatially" by occurring in close proximity to each other as the comic "moves forward in time through the space of the page."
- Despite this proximity, the visual and the verbal (image and text) exist "nonsynchronously"
- So readers of comics participate in a constant, "often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning"

Let's Turn back to the Image

• The most common artistic mode of the comic form is:

– The Cartoon

Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics

- Cartooning is "a form of amplification through simplification"
- ABSTRACTION
- Not necessarily "eliminating details [but] focusing on specific details"

Will Eisner

"The cartoon is the result of exaggeration and simplification"

Douglas Wolk, Reading Comics

"What you are looking at is a manifestation of the [the artists] style, a personal interpretation"

The line:

- An artist's unspoken signature
- The way that an artist defines/abstracts objects or people because in real life nothing has a line to define its edge. Things just end.

Other Artistic Methods Unique to Comics

- Framing:
 - Panel
 - Page
- "The Gutter"
 - Blank space between panels
- Balloons
 - Speech, thought, caption

Other Artistic Methods Unique to Comics

- Camera Angles
 - High looking down, powerlessness
 - Low looking up, powerful
 - Zoom-ins

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• Provide visual focus and thematic emphasis

Neil Gaiman

"One of the worst headlines I ever saw in my life--my heart sank--was a headline in The Sun newspaper ... and the headline read, "Werewolf Captured in Southend." That was the front page story, and I was really upset. I thought, "I don't want anybody to capture werewolves!" If you capture a werewolf, then you're only allowed one truth at that point..."

Neil Gaiman

"I want a complete plurality. I don't want anybody to capture a unicorn. I don't want any werewolves to be captured. Actually, I think it was some man who'd gone mad on pills and attacked a police station, if I remember correctly. I want a plurality of possible truths, and the freedom to imagine."

The Sandman (75 issues Jan. '89 – Mar '96)

- "It's never 'only a dream,' John Constantine" (Dream a Little Dream of Me)
- "Beyond, outside my dreamworld there is INFINITE dust, infinite dark. And the DREAMWORLD is infinte, although it is bounded on every side" (Imperfect Hosts)
- "The DREAMWORLD, the DREAMTIME, the UNCONSCIOUS—call it what you WILL—is as much part of ME as I am part of IT" (Imperfect Hosts)

Psychoanalysis

- Analyzing dreams and thoughts as revealing elements of the unconscious.
- Analyzing the effect of unconscious mental processes on literature.
- Treating literature the way an analyst would treat a dream.

Carl Jung – The Unconscious

- "vast and inexhaustible," "unkowable background" of consciousness.
- The entirety of the realm of the human mind that individuals do not possess a constant awareness of.
- Individual Unconscious: made up of repressed individual experiences, feelings, memories
- Collective Unconscious: ancient, exists within every human but buried very, very deeply

Carl Jung – Myth and Dreams

- Both myths and dreams are the unconscious speaking to consciousness through a strange language:
 - symbols
 - Archetypes





Gaiman's Morpheus or Dream

- In the words of Death, an "anthropomorphic personification"
- As a character, Dream occupies an interesting place:
 - He is a personification of the phenomenon of dreaming
 - Archetypal, meta, beyond all literature.
 - He is the ruler of the dreamworld and the hero of our story
 - He has a distinct literary function
 - He is the hero of a monthly comic book

Dream contains every story—superheroes, literature, myth—folded within him. Like the unconscious, he cannot be bound. Yet like consciousness, he is bound by distinct rules.



Religion and Philosophy

Superheroes and Myth

Psychology

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