

Summary of Neil Gaiman, *Sandman* lectures, November 12 and 17, 2014

KEYWORDS: COLLABORATION, INTERTEXTUALITY, METANARRATIVE

We returned to the graphic novel format with the first collection of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series

Neil Gaiman (born 1960) has written fiction for children and adults, short stories, screen plays (including the script for the CGI version of *Beowulf*), and several graphic novel series

*The Sandman* chronicles ran from 1989 to 1996; Gaiman collaborated with many different artists, and we discussed the implications of collaborative authorship

We discussed Dream's search for his lost tools in terms of the quest narrative, as laid out by Joseph Campbell and others

Dream is a power, one of the Endless; the stories Gaiman tells about the Endless often confront metaphysical questions. I quoted a passage from another number in the series, when Dream explains to Desire the role of the Endless:

"We of the endless are the servants of the living – we are NOT their masters. WE exist because they know, deep in their hearts, that we exist. When the last living thing has left this universe, then our task will be done. And we do not manipulate them. If anything, they manipulate us. We are their toys. Their dolls, if you will."

Here, as in his novel *American Gods* (quoted in the essay questions), Gaiman explores the connection between powers and belief/ the imagination Dream's role as lord of the dreamworld leads us inevitably to think about questions concerning what constitutes the "real"

We returned to the idea of intertextuality; the references in the Sandman universe come from very different realms

Some of the characters are drawn from the DC Comics universe (John Constantine, Scott Free, J'onn Jonzz, and Doctor Destiny)

Doctor Destiny is also John Dee, and the other John Dee (the historical figure who was a scientist, mathematician, and physician to Elizabeth I) is part of Gaiman's imaginative universe as well

Gaiman's persistent interest in how stories come to be written – his awareness and showcasing of the workings of narrative (**metanarrative**) – is served by another set of intertextual references, in this case to writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, and John Milton

*The Sandman* series features Shakespeare twice, writing for Dream; first he creates *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and at the end of Dream's life, *The Tempest*. Prospero's famous, metatheatrical lines from *The Tempest* have many resonances for Gaiman's project:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

The references to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* allow Gaiman to explore questions relating to good and evil

Milton's long poem appeared in its 12-book format in 1674 (it appeared first in 1667); Milton, looking for an epic subject, had considered writing about King Arthur, but then he hit on the idea of a long narrative poem recounting the creation of the world and the fall of mankind; Christ's offering of himself to redeem mankind makes him the hero of the poem

But from the Romantic period on, readers have often been fascinated by Satan, as we discussed with reference to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Gaiman has his Lucifer quote Milton's Satan: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven"; many contemporary readers find Satan's unshakeable determination appealing (though we discussed C.S. Lewis's contention that Milton never would have imagined an audience that would take "the Father of Lies" at his word)

We discussed how the visual contrasts between Dream and Lucifer complicate our expectations of good and evil; we connected the treatment of Dream's sister Death to the same issue, as she is an appealing and unthreatening figure rather than the "Grim Reaper" we might normally expect

Dream recognizes, at the end of *Preludes and Nocturnes*, that he has responsibilities, as does his sister Death; unlike Milton's Satan, he accepts his role and finds fulfillment in it, though he remains a complex and troubled character