# Kent Academic Repository

**'Footnotes to Miller and Moore': Monomyth and Transnationality in the 1986 Superhero Comics**

Fred Francis

## Abstract

New developments in comics studies have begun to consider the superhero comic as a transnational, rather than American, phenomenon. This approach offers a new way of thinking about the typical story that Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* jointly upended the comics world in 1986. While there is robust criticism to challenge the idea that 1986 was a miraculous year for comics, the continuing attention drawn by the two works requires us to think further about their apparent similarity. This article proposes the importance of a narrative of American exceptionalism within comics culture as a defining feature of the contemporary context for the production of the works. It then examines their responses to this context, arguing that they undermine the American monomyth of the superhero in different ways that originate in the different national positions of the two writers.

**Introduction**

The dominant opinion of the contemporary American superhero narrative states that everything changed in 1986. Since then, superhero comics have been 'a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore' (Klock 2002, 4). In a recent example from the *European Journal of American Studies*, Michael J. Prince (2015) repeats the familiar story of the works that changed comics – Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* – when he states that 'the year 1986 stands as a watershed in this history of the graphic novel'. This history, Prince suggests, rests on an initial wave of praise for the two works when they were first published. Since then, a wealth of criticism has challenged the opinion that 1986 was truly a 'watershed' moment for the graphic novel as a form, but within the superhero genre the critical importance of the two works means the narrative is harder to shake off. [1] Therefore, it is worth addressing the Miller/Moore pairing in greater detail. When the importance of the 1986 works of Miller and Moore is so regularly asserted, it should be noted that citing them as a single event is problematic. Whilst there are obvious similarities between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* that go beyond just publication date, pairing the two texts glosses over substantial differences between the two writers that can enhance our understanding of the works and the moment that produced them. A more nuanced approach to the relationship of the two texts is necessary. This approach should not disregard the case for the significance of the works, or their similarity, but should also take account of the significant differences that determine the texts and re-assess a narrative codified some thirty years ago.

The nationality of the two writers is particular difference that has often been elided by the narrative of similarity. In the context of a genre that is concerned enough with national

identity to have produced characters like Captain America and Captain Britain, the fact is of some importance. A number of interviews or articles that begin from the position that Alan Moore is the doyenne of the superhero comic will remark that he has lived almost his entire life in Northampton, England. Susannah Clarke's laudatory article on Moore mentions the fact of his hometown ten times, and the first five of these are as a contrast to the American setting of his superhero writing (Clarke, 2015). The 'startling' (Lamont, 2012) nature of Moore's domicile then appears to challenge the lingering popular assumption that 'superhero comics' are an American mode, written and set in America, written about and by Americans. Two common levels of journalistic discourse surrounding the superhero comic are working in competing directions here. One approach presents Moore's Britishness as a curio at odds with the idea of the superhero genre, while the other pairs Moore and Miller as origin figures for the contemporary comic, either deliberately or implicitly suggesting the similarity of their works.

A series of critical questions arises from the recognition of these two conflicting narratives, and points to the need to examine further the relationship between the two texts. It is germane to ask how the American superhero comic is written by Moore in *Watchmen*, and whether this is different to *The Dark Knight Returns*, a book that is American in both setting and its authorship. Is there any difference in the idea of an American superhero, or America itself, between the two writers? How are these Americas reconciled with a developing transatlantic point-of-view that the hiring of Moore and other British writers in the 1980s implies? The continuing existence of a narrative that pairs *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* despite a changing understanding of the history of comics indicates the need to reimagine the relationship of this most celebrated pair of works. Rather than either wholly accept the narrative of their similarity or dismiss it entirely, considering the ways in which

Frank Miller and Alan Moore navigate the idea of the American superhero reveals both truth to the *annus mirabilis* narrative and the necessity of better understanding the story of the comics of 1986. In particular, it is the negotiation of the balance between the global and the local contexts for the American superhero that this necessity is revealed.

**The American Myth of Superhero Comics**

Comics studies has for most of its life thought in terms of 'national traditions' – American, Franco-Belgian, Japanese, and so on – and treated these as 'relatively self-contained phenomena' (Denson, Meyer and Stein 2013, 1). The global context of interactions between these traditions, like much else when it comes to comics studies, is a scholarly lacuna which has only recently begun to be filled. Where the basic facts indicate that Moore's texts are immanently transatlantic, the same is required of the critical response to these works. However, it must not be forgotten in the move to '(re)read comics … as transnational phenomena' (Denson, Meyer and Stein 2013: 2) that these comics were produced at a time where the prevailing discourse was one of American exceptionalism. This discourse can be seen not only in the comics themselves but in nascent studies of the superhero comic. Transnational intrusions into this framework must then be defined against the more insular national conception, creating a complex model of interaction. In order to be a successful example of the form, an American model had to be replicated by the transnational intrusion. At the same time, this intrusion gained particular advantages and found particular limits formed by the distance between creator and subject. In particular, it is in the act of replicating and examining the methods by which a national model is constructed that the transnational intrusion can claim legitimacy. Therefore, understanding the national tradition to which

Miller and Moore are responding is at the heart of reading between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*.

Until recently, America as the home and the point of origin for the superhero comic was essentially undisputed. The claim, particularly at the time of Moore's importation into the American mainstream, was for the superhero as an inherently American phenomenon. One of the early moments of the study of the superhero confirms this opinion and offers useful insight into the context to which Moore (and his British compatriots) were responding. 'Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero' (Lang & Trimble, 1988) frames the superhero within previous work on *The American Monomyth* (Jewett & Lawrence, 1988).[2] In both works, what appears today to be a blinkered exceptionalism provides the definition for this aspect of American popular culture. The 'distinctively American monomyth' of the hero, as Jewett and Lawrence describe it, is one where:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal
> institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to
> renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his
> decisive victory restores the community to its paradisal condition; the
> superhero then recedes into obscurity. (xii)

Although ultimately Jewett and Lawrence claim the monomyth is dangerous and must be scrutinised more carefully (224-5), Lang and Trimble are keen to emphasise its critical utility. In their study the unabashed exceptionalism continues without question and the strength of their analysis is circumscribed by the insistence that the superhero matters to

America, and should be interpreted through American ideals. Lang and Trimble go so far as to claim that 'it is logical to assume that the American monomythic hero is different from the heroes of other cultures', and that Superman is the 'purest example' of this concept (1988, 158-160). Effectively inscribing the superhero as a figure whose analysis must take place within the context of American, rather than global, culture, Lang and Trimble exemplify and begin to codify an outlook that frames the American superhero narratives of the time.

Writing from New York in the 1980s, the discourse that maintained the superhero comic as an American phenomenon is central to Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. Often, Miller's narrative takes the form of an ironic, darkened version of the monomyth, in line with the 'degenerate' forms of the myth Jewett and Lawrence find in the American underground comics (1988, 202-3). *Dark Knight* follows the primary pattern of the monomyth almost exactly – after the failures of local and national government to deal with rising crime, Batman returns from retirement to save Gotham before 'receding' underground at the end of the text by faking his own death. The glaring difference, that Miller makes much of, is that Gotham was never the Edenic city on a hill that Jewett and Lawrence describe. Rather, it is the 'city that has given up' (Miller, Janson and Varley 2002, 12). Like Robert Crumb and others before him, Miller is aware of and undermining a central feature of the monomyth from the book's opening pages. Batman's greeting to criminals, 'welcome to hell' (38), then reads as Miller inverting the mythic state and creating a narrative where the culture of the American monomyth is to be incorporated but challenged.

In his introduction to the collected *Dark Knight*, it appears that Alan Moore sees Frank Miller's inversion of the American monomyth as his primary success.[3] At the same time, Moore's concerns as a reader include the necessity of looking beyond this national

tradition. At the beginning of his introduction, Moore ties together an increasingly global

viewpoint and the need for legitimacy and development of the superhero comic:

> With the increase in media coverage and information technology, we
>
> see more of the world, comprehend its workings a little more clearly,
>
> and as a result our perception of ourselves and the society surrounding
>
> us has been modified. Consequently … we demand new heroes.
>
> (Moore 1986)

Rejecting Alan Quatermain as a 'white imperialist' and the 'muscle-bound oafs' of comic

books as out of touch with a contemporary world, Moore effectively conflates a transnational

perspective with the future development of the superhero comic. However, his comments on

*The Dark Knight Returns* that follows this opening argument makes no reference to a global

perspective for the text. Rather, praise is directed solely at the undermining of the American

superhero within an American context. He writes that 'the Bat-man himself, taking account

of our current perception of vigilantes as a social force in the wake of Bernie Goetz, is seen

as a near-fascist'. Moore's 'our' makes American perception global, suggesting that the work

Miller performs in an ostensibly nation-specific context has a wider impact. This

undermining of the dominant American paradigm in a way that in fact enlarges the

boundaries of the American outlook at first appears at odds with Moore's call to extend the

global horizons of the superhero. Moore recognises, however, that Miller's undermining of a

national tradition in a global forum offers a potential for a rethinking of the national position

of the superhero.

Moore's introduction therefore participates in *and* begins to undermine the American myth of the superhero – reinforcing the national myth is the first element in in his call to go beyond it. His call may seem surprising today, since new studies suggest the commingling of national traditions in comics had occurred for a long time before Alan Moore became a writer of note. Ben Little notes the influence of Japanese manga in Frank Miller's work as evidence for the impact of external influences on the mainstream American market, as well the reciprocal impact of the American superhero traditions in other countries (Little 2010, 140). In the case of Marvel UK, where Moore would work on *Captain Britain*, the superhero comic was not uniquely American but met the needs of, and responded to, a global market (Murray 2010, 32-33). In the UK, a generation of writers were involved in the work of rethinking the American superhero in a global context, as series like *Judge Dredd*, *Miracleman* and *Zenith* suggest. Williams and Lyons support the idea that the increasingly transnational production and consumption of superhero comics was reflected in the comics narratives, asserting that 'the institutional transaction of texts, creators and capital across national borders has contributed to observable productive tensions in the comics texts themselves' (Williams and Lyons 2010, xiii).

I would suggest that placing Moore within this changing context of comics criticism exposes the productive tensions in his thought. Miller is performing the act Moore desires in his introduction – an increasingly global version of the superhero – by introducing influences from beyond America's borders. These influences are most obvious in his work on *Ronin*, *Daredevil* and *Wolverine*. However, for Moore, already writing from a transnational position, any evidence of a more global outlook in Miller is overshadowed by his subversion of the tradition of the American hero. It is, perhaps, a little unfair to Moore to focus on the fact he does not discuss a broader trend or Miller's other comics in his short introduction to a

particular work. However, the fact remains that Moore's suggestion that 'we see more of the world' is at odds with his words that shrink global perception in line with that of an American reader. Not only does Moore not mention the transpacific element of Frank Miller's work (and Moore's career more generally shows little evidence of interest in the Japanese tradition), his analysis of an undermining of the American tradition seems to reinscribe that tradition by emphasising it as a point of departure.

The tension between the two facts stated at the beginning of this article is then defined as one of transnational responses to national models, and the resolution of this tension becomes the point of necessary scholarly investigation. Resolving this tension could occur as direct challenge: Jochen Ecke has convincingly argued that British comics authors successfully 'adopted an attitude toward authorship that was in radical opposition to … the American mainstream' (2013, 165). However, within this paradigm, it is also possible that transnational approaches borrow from and replicate the form of the national traditions, yet subvert the insular nationality of the form in so doing.  It is this case that is suggested by Moore's introduction to *The Dark Knight Returns*, where American self-conception is emphasised *as* the global perspective, yet the text is praised for its ability to challenge this model from within the same tradition. In both Moore and Miller's work, then, there is not a radical opposition to the mainstream but as Michael Prince indicates in an earlier article, 'portrayals of the costumed heroes in aggregate treat American national identity in a sophisticated and nuanced manner' (2011, 816). It the particular and valuable nuance that both replicate and undermine the national context that can be used to read the two works.


**Frank Miller: The Challenge from Within**

The moment of the mid-1980s is a moment of tension for the superhero as American icon. As the examination above suggests, superhero comics writers had to situate their narratives in a complex and changing environment composed of competing theoretical and financial demands. The response varied from the insular reinforcement of the 'American' monomyth to the deliberate broadening of the horizons for the superhero, in line with developments that had occurred outside the borders of the USA. Frank Miller's early career used global and local viewpoints to challenge the national context for the superhero comic. In the first case, Miller's relationship to Japanese popular culture undermines the idea that the works of 1986 emerged without precedent. In the second, *Dark Knight* used the context of a media focus on crime in urban America to change perceptions of the superhero tradition. However, it is also worth considering that Miller's use of a national cultural context is not restricted to current affairs. In *Dark Knight*, Miller also uses a historical national context to challenge the superhero tradition. Following a reading method Miller explicitly points to within the narrative, it is possible to discover the ways in which the text challenges the exceptionalist conception of the superhero by creating a new point of origin for the Batman character.

Miller is acutely aware of the cultural context for *The Dark Knight Returns*, and manipulates this context in order to undermine it. Although his fascination with film noir and hard-boiled detective fiction would become obvious in *Sin City*, the legacy of Chandler and Hammett has informed Miller's work throughout his career (Fried 2010, 342). Less obvious, or at least less critically attended to, is Miller's incorporation of a longer history of detective writing in America in his work. In *Dark Knight*, this context is brought out when Poe's detective fiction becomes the inspiration for Bruce Wayne becoming the Batman. Towards the end of the text, Miller returns to Bruce's childhood, recalling Alfred reading to him 'The

Purloined Letter'. Young Bruce apparently 'demanded "the killer was caught. And punished"' and Alfred 'assured him that the villain had met justice' (2002, 189). Miller's allusion offers a new point of origin for the Batman character. In doing so, he undermines the monomyth interpretation that locates the superhero within vague national ideals and instead makes the superhero comic the result of a tradition of American literature that begins with Poe.

Comics, at the time, were easily seen as an American tradition, as Lang and Trimble demonstrate. However, they were less readily seen as literature. The 1971 revision to the Comics Code that governed their content consented to allow 'vampires, ghouls and werewolves ... when handled in the classic tradition such as Frankenstein, Dracula, and other high calibre literary works written by Edgar Allan Poe, Saki, Conan Doyle and other respected authors' (Gabilliet 2010, 318). Poe, evidently, is a measure of 'high calibre' literature to which comics should aspire but are not admitted. Miller's response to the cultural position of the American comic book (wholly American, yet not afforded cultural legitimacy) is to give his work an origin in a national tradition of literature rather than myth. At the same time, this act undermines a separation of the two cultures of literature and comic books. Miller's challenge to a national tradition has a precedent in Poe's own rise to the status of 'high calibre' literature. Peter Coveillo has analysed the purpose of Melville during the American Renaissance as creating a 'properly American literature, emerging "unparented"' (Coveillo 2005, 92) from the European literary background. The project of writers like Hawthorne, Melville and Poe to build a 'properly American literature' from the overarching background of European literature required an act of simultaneous emulation and rupture, to demonstrate legitimacy and to require being read on their own terms. It is this model of

emulation and differentiation that Miller adopts for his own 'unparented' orphan superhero, the Batman.

Conspicuously, in Bruce and Alfred's world the ending to Poe's tale is not the case as we might remember it. In Poe's version of 'The Purloined Letter' there is no 'killer': the Minister D— is not 'caught' by the end of the tale, and the 'justice' meted out is in the sense of a potential outcome which may take place after the end of the tale. In Miller's hands, the story changes from Poe's non-violent puzzle to a narrative of vengeance and judgement. Rather than focusing on Poe's narrative, in retelling it Miller blurs further the lines between high and low cultures. By removing the story from its original – what we might consider Poe's 'Purloined Letter' – the story becomes part of the American monomyth. Dupin metes out justice after the failures of the state police force and Dupin the detective becomes Dupin the 'selfless superhero'. The retold 'Purloined Letter' is therefore more functional for Miller. Miller's retelling of Dupin as a violent detective seeking justice reincorporates Batman into the American tradition of Poe by turning Poe into the originator of the hard-boiled fiction of Chandler and Spillane. Simultaneously, it locates the origins of Batman in nineteenth-century France – the setting for Poe's Dupin stories. If superhero comics are considered an American monomyth, Miller's retelling of Poe indicates to the reader his concern to challenge both elements of this conception by returning to the beginnings of canonical American fiction.

Having noted Miller's use of Poe, the rest of the text rewards further investigation on the same lines. Miller, it is clear, utilises Poe throughout as part of a rethinking of his national context. When the aristocratic, ancestral legacy of the 'House of Usher' collapses at the end of Poe's tale, the symbolic weight of the collapse of the old order and the horror of lineage is exposed. The destruction of Wayne Manor at the end of *Dark Knight* directly parallels the 'House of Usher', extending the multiplicity of symbolism behind Bruce's decision to

destroy the container of his personal history. Poe's description of the fall of the House of Usher bears particular comparison to Miller because it indicates that Miller is not only directly borrowing from Poe, as the similarity of the passages suggests, but taking on for comics the task Poe takes on for the American short story. Miller is re-narrating the fall of the House of Usher to effectively reposition himself within a national tradition. To compare the two passages:

> Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened--there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind--the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight--my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder— there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters --and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher." (Poe 1984, 335)

> 'the central mass of Wayne Manor shudders as if alive…/…then vanishes in a flash, bright as the sun.// The world turns ruby red'. (Miller 2002, 196)

There are three significant aspects to the description of the collapse of the ancestral home in Miller's writing which appear to emulate Poe: a personifying simile, an emphasis on speed and sudden light, and the colouring of the scene with intense red. Although Poe's personifying simile is filtered through a secondary layer of non-humanity ('shouting … like the voice of … waters') the simile opens the reading of the house as history, containing within it the anguish of generations of fading aristocracy released by collapse. Miller's version of the scene replicates the conjoining of the collapse of the manor with the sense of a collapsing lineage as the legacy of both Batman and the Wayne family are destroyed. Miller's emulation of Poe is more obviously temporal than geographic, in that he is borrowing from work found earlier in his national tradition. At the same time, however, the Batman story is revealed as relying on similar remnants of a European model of aristocracy to that which Poe collapses in 'House of Usher'. Miller is embedding his work within his own national literary tradition, but a secondary effect of this is to indicate the ways in which Batman as benevolent aristocrat has his origins not in American but in European traditions.

Poe's tales make deliberate contrast between the old world of Europe and the new world of the United States. Miller's uses of Poe have a similar purpose. Aligning Batman with a tradition that begins in Poe, Miller challenges the American monomyth in order to establish a new position for his work. The comparison to Poe has two paths, challenging both the 'American' and the 'monomyth' conceptions of the superhero. In the first instance, the use of Poe points to an origin point for the Batman that is not uniquely American, but instead was already the product of a transatlantic discourse. In the second instance, the same gesture reveals a literary heritage for Batman that challenges the separation between high and low culture that comics faced, and some cases, like the Comics Code Authority, had imposed

upon itself as a limitation. Geoff Klock has already noted the implicit message of Wayne's final speech balloon – 'there's a spring right beneath' – as Miller's call to the next generation of writers to draw on the history of the Batman myth (2002, 47-8). In this context, the metaphor extends further: the spring around which Bruce Wayne intends to build a challenge to the American state becomes the effusive American culture and literature that can be used to present a challenge to the American monomyth.

**Alan Moore: The Transnational Response**

If Frank Miller is challenging the assumed American national context from within the American tradition, Moore is right to praise *Dark Knight's* subversive potential in the terms of a global rethinking of the superhero. However, apparent similarities between Moore's *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* are immediately called into question. If Moore's text were attempting to perform the same work, he would have to replicate the national context from a position outside of its borders. Strikingly, this appears to be exactly the reading Miller had of Moore's work when he noted about *Watchmen* that 'you can't help but see American icons reworked from a very European point of view. It's very hard to miss the whole British flavour' (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 45). In my reading, the first sentence of Miller's analysis would also not be amiss when applied to *Dark Knight* – the 'European point of view' is brought out by the underlying transnational context for Poe. However, Miller's statement appears to separate Moore's work from his own on the grounds of national origin. *Dark Knight*, we can infer, approaches American icons from an American point of view and yet Miller continually manages to find ways of undermining an exceptionalist American

approach to the superhero. If Miller is right, there should be a demonstrable difference in *Watchmen's* approach to a global understanding of the superhero that separates the two texts.

Miller does not go so far as to explain the 'European point of view' he identifies in Moore's work, but a suggestion can be made on the basis of a direct comparison between the two writers. In *Dark Knight* Miller seeks to challenge a national conception, and inevitably reveals a transatlantic history in doing so. Moore's use of his cultural context seeks primarily to move the superhero beyond national borders, but without wholly undoing the national tradition within which he must artificially place his work. To achieve this, Moore performs a similar act of exposing the inherently transatlantic qualities of the culture that underlies the superhero by providing the context in which to read his work through quotation and allusion. For Moore, unlike Miller, his nationality makes the transatlantic viewpoint already immanent within his work. He must, therefore, deliberately make his work American whilst he seeks to demonstrate a global vision for the superhero.

The touchstone for the critical approach that opens out this reading is found in Paul Giles's work. Giles theorises a link between the transatlantic viewpoint and nineteenth-century American writing in his analysis of Thomas Pynchon. In Giles' text, Pynchon's quest to decipher the 'systematic conspiracy of reality' is linked to Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville's '"distinctly American vision" of trying to unravel an order lurking beneath the visible world'. This view is then reformulated in a transatlantic context to suggest that 'Pynchon's texts work paradoxically to inscribe their vision of a New World by returning continually to the site of the Old' (2002, 226). I want to suggest Moore's text works in the same way. We should read Moore as adapting a 'distinctly American vision' similar to Pynchon and Melville before him: describing the new world not only in the context of but from the position of the old. The 'European' flavour Frank Miller posits could then be

suggested in our critical terminology as a transatlantic flavour. This transatlantic flavour extends the critique of the American myth of the superhero by returning to a transatlantic history.

Like Miller, Moore deliberately positions his work within a context of 'high calibre literary works' (as the Comics Code would have it) that should inform our reading of the text. Notably, both Pynchon and Melville, writers at the heart of Giles' argument for the American transatlantic viewpoint, are touchstones for Moore. Pynchon is acknowledged as an influence when his novel *V* is prominently displayed in the library of banned books in *V for Vendetta* (Moore 2005, 65). Melville's *Moby Dick* is recurring reference point for Moore's projects. He has described *Watchmen* as an attempt to create 'a superhero Moby Dick', and has invited similar comparisons for his 2016 novel *Jerusalem* (Eno and Csawza 2006; Lewis 2011). In support of this idea, the text of *Watchmen* mimics Melville's opening 'Extracts' by closing each chapter with quotation. These points of reference cover a broad variety of names: Percy Bysshe Shelley, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello, Carl Jung and the Bible (among others). Moore's influences are diverse go beyond Miller's drawing together of superhero comics and American detective fiction. Rather, like Melville, the text demonstrates reference points that cross borders of nationality and cultural legitimacy to reconsider the terms of national significance. In Moore, the superhero comic is made more obviously transnational, yet the method by which Moore achieves this message is ultimately the same as Miller – the active repositioning of his work in the context of pre-existing traditions.

In the narrative of *Watchmen*, it is the character of Ozymandias who carries the weight of the transatlantic outlook. Ozymandias, it is revealed at the end of the plot, has renounced a life of wealth in order go above national governments and orchestrate a fake alien invasion, uniting America and Russia over a common enemy and averting mutual

destruction. This description makes Ozymandias as close to a paradigm of the American monomyth as Miller's Batman. Both narratives even share the same inversion of the first tenet of the monomyth. The Cold War world before Ozymandias' actions is not Edenic; like Gotham it is a fallen paradise. It is not completely surprising to find, then, that Moore also challenges the national outlook of the monomyth. The idea of Ozymandias as the emblem of the monomyth is subverted by his role as a hero who finds validation in the old world of Greek and Egyptian history and myth. Like Miller, Moore displaces Ozymandias in order to present a transatlantic context for his American character.  Like Melville, a writer who is known to 'uproot American heroes from their familiar territory and displace them into the world of the Levant' (Giles 2002, 77), Moore does this with a narrative of a transatlantic journey.

Giles concentrates much of his analysis on *Clarel*, but it is of course a common theme of Melville's work that that insight is gained through geographical displacement – particularly via sea voyage. Ishmael, in *Moby Dick's* famous opening paragraph, accounts that it is 'high time to get to sea' whenever his melancholic moods 'threaten to overwhelm' him (Melville 1988, 3). If Moore sought to make *Watchmen* the *Moby Dick* of comics, the reference points to more than simply a claim at stature and legitimacy, but highlights a desire to replicate the transnational outlook of Melville's work.[4] Returning to earlier texts in order to discover transnational viewpoints again has precedence here: inherent in the idea of an 'Old World' is the argument that a geographical dislocation is also a temporal dislocation. In *Clarel,* the journey to a religious Old World offers a historical perspective needed to make sense of the present situation. In a similar way, it is only through his journey to the desert that Ozymandias is able to begin his mission to renew America and 'apply antiquity's teachings to today's world' (Moore and Gibbons 1987, XI:10-11).[5] Ozymandias is in a long line of

American intellectuals 'transplanted to the global epicentre of a world religion … so their Puritan consciousness can be examined within a larger comparative perspective' (Giles 2002, 80). Writing back from the 'Old World', Moore's analysis of the superhero emphasises an origin that is both historically and geographically outside of America. Where this may not be obvious for the American analysts of the monomyth, insight can be found by journeying to the Old World point of origin.

Moore's development of Ozymandias as a self-appointed guide for the world with an origin in Egyptian mythology aligns him with Melville's statement in *Moby Dick* that 'the earliest standers of mast-heads were the old Egyptians' (1988, 154). Melville's assertion highlights the relationship between the ability to foresee or see below the surface and an act of physical removal, distance or being raised to a height. The claim, Melville states, has its origins in the 'general belief among archaeologists, that the first pyramids were founded for astronomical purposes', enabling their standees to 'sing out for new stars; even as the look-outs of a modern ship sing out for a sail, or a whale just bearing in sight' (1988, 155). Although a deliberate parallel here is speculative, Ozymandias' words when he discusses his own abilities of perception are markedly similar. He suggests that when faced with a problem 'my first step was to stand back as far as I could, to view the problem from a fresh perspective, with my vista widening with my comprehension' (Moore & Gibbons 1987, XI:21). Certainly, the major facet of Ozymandias' heroic nature – his ability to predict and then subvert the destruction of the of America – is here tied to a transnational or global viewpoint.

Ozymandias' ability always to gain 'the bigger picture' is directly tied to his transformative moment of insight in the Egyptian desert. After his return to America he develops a method of viewing multiple media sources simultaneously in order to understand

global events better. When viewing all sources at once, 'an emergent worldview becomes gradually discernible' (Moore & Gibbons1987, XI:1). 'Worldview' then offers a double-meaning that makes seeing and insight contiguous – it is through a stepping back or gaining of wider perspective that understanding is found. Ozymandias' method of understanding the world from the observation of television screens – 'information in its most concentrated form'(X:7) – is a method of constructing a world from fragmentary media sources. In W*atchmen*, this act is not restricted to the superhero figures. A newspaper vendor constructs his worldview from the newspapers he sells, and these are presented as in dialogue with the adventure comics he sells, which are interjected into the narrative. Even the reader of *Watchmen* must perform the same act as the background to the world is delivered via fictional fragments of documents and books, presented as adjuncts to the narrative at the end of each chapter. Moore's use of literary sources now reads a central to the global outlook of the text. A 'worldview', meaning both an outlook and a better global understanding of the world, is gained through the absorption of more and broader media sources. In the light of an exceptionalist American context for the superhero narrative, Moore's work reads as a strident call for better thinking about the superhero genre.

**Conclusions**

Moore's transatlantic vision, then, is explained in his ability to use temporal and geographical perspective to incorporate but undermine a particular vision of the superhero narrative. This suggests, as Giles does, that 'to reconsider American culture in a transnational context is not to abandon the idea of nationalism, but to reimagine it as a virtual construction, a residual narrative rather than a unifying social power' (2002, 20). It follows that Miller

would identify this aspect of Moore's work as 'European' or 'British'. The use of Poe in his own work had been a method for Miller to reposition his work within a national context. By tracing a line from Poe to himself, Miller undermined a division of 'high' and 'low' culture that placed Batman's origins in Poe's detective fiction. A secondary effect of this rethinking the historical frame for the superhero is to reveal a transatlantic context for Batman, via Poe, that chimes with Miller's transpacific influence displayed in *Daredevil*. However, Frank Miller could hardly be said to have found a truly global vision, as the increasingly nationalist (and ultimately Islamophobic) trajectory of his later career suggests.

Moore, on the other hand, has created a work where the geographical and historical framework of the text continually emphasises a legacy of connection to the Old World, and actively encourages the reader to emulate this in their own reading. Aiming to make a superhero *Moby Dick*, Moore creates a text of fragmentary information where characters rely on geographical displacement for insight into their situation. Through the method of gaining a position to develop a global viewpoint on the superhero, *Watchmen* positions the superhero as temporally and geographically displaced from contemporary America. This position highlights Moore's 'British flavour' – it is only by working as an outside observer that the necessary perspective for critique is gained. The two works of 1986 are then revealed to begin from similar, although not the same, mission statements. As the evidence of a dialogue between the writers suggests, when read together they can work in tandem toward the same goal of undermining the prevalent 'American monomyth' view of the superhero narrative that was increasingly out-of-step with their contemporary world. However, the facts of their differences are also emphasised from within the text. It is essential not to paper over these differences, and they go far beyond my example of national origin, as they can offer critical

insight into the ways the two texts work with, and respond to, their similar subject matter and contemporary situation.

As a final note, by reading Moore alongside Giles' critical exposition of the transnational dimension to American literature, the reading that Giles wishes to expose in Melville is also exposed in Moore. An under-investigated relationship of influence from Melville to Moore is suggested by this conclusion. It appears that Moore (and his fellow 'British Invasion' comics writers) are in line with Giles' theoretical advancements as they seek to move beyond the attitude toward comics that pervaded Anglophone culture at the time. Where Giles bemoans the fact that discussions of popular (American) culture in Britain in the 1980s became 'increasingly empathic' and 'journalistic' – 'enthralled by the very phenomena they were seeking to critique' (2002: 263-4) – this is demonstrably not the case for writers of superhero comics. Instead, their work casts a critical eye on this area of popular culture, and challenges its assumptions and foundations. By reimporting a vision of America, and of American comics, to a market which itself had become transnational without having its assumptions of nationalism and patriotism challenged, comics in the 1980s began to offer the transnational feedback loop that Giles would later theorise. For the comics scholar today, in a developing and changing field, an emphasis is placed on the need to consider the discourses that fall under the term American Studies not only as theoretical approaches to comics but, for a media with such strong national traditions, as a part of the contextual framework in which the works are written. Doing so creates the ability to revisit and problematise the core assumptions of the work, indicating a path for both comics studies and American studies to pursue.

**References**

Clarke, Susannah. 2015. 'Susanna Clarke interviews Alan Moore: the wonderful wizard of... Northampton'. *The Daily Telegraph.* 16 May. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/11608804/Susanna-Clark-interviews-Alan-Moore-the-wonderful-wizard-of...-Northampton.html

Coveillo, Peter. 2005. *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Denson, Shane, Christina Meyer and Daniel Stein. 2013. 'Introducing Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads'. In *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* edited by Denson, Meyer and Stein, 1-12. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Ecke, Jochen. 2013. 'Warren Ellis: Performing the Transnational Author in the American Comics Mainstream'. In *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* edited by Denson, Meyer and Stein, 163-179. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Eno, Vincent and El Csawza. 2006. 'Alan Moore interview 1988'. *Feuilleton* 20 Feb. http://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2006/02/20/alan-moore-interview-1988/

Fried, Arthur. 2010. 'Crime in Comics and the Graphic Novel'. In *A Companion to Crime Fiction* edited by Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsley, 332-344. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Gabilliet, Jean-Paul. 2010. *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Giles, Paul. 2002. *Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imaginary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence. 1988. *The American Monomyth.* 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Klock, Geoff. 2002. *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*. London: Continuum.

Lamont, Tom, 2012. 'Alan Moore: why I turned my back on Hollywood'. *The Guardian*. 15 December. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/15/alan-moore-why-i-rejected-hollywood-interview

Lang, Jeffery. S. and Patrick Trimble. 1988. 'Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero'. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 22 (3): 157-173. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1988.2203_157.x

Lewis, Helen. 2011. 'Alan Moore: "I've disproved the existence of death"'. *New Statesman*. 16 June. http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/helen-lewis-hasteley/2011/06/alan-moore-novel-jerusalem

Little, Ben. 2010. '2000AD: Understanding the "British Invasion" of American Comics'. In *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures* edited by Beringer, Ecke and Haberkorn, 140-152. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Melville, Herman. 1988. *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library.

Miller, Frank, Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley. 2002. *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. New York: DC Comics.

Moore, Alan. 1986. 'The Mark of Batman: An Introduction' in *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley. New York: DC Comics.

Moore, Alan and Dave Gibbons. 1987. *Watchmen*. London: Titan Books.

Moore, Alan and David Lloyd. 2005. *V for Vendetta*. London: Titan Books.

Murray, Chris. 2010. 'Signals from Airstrip One: The British Invasion of Mainstream American Comics'. In *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* edited by Paul Williams & James Lyons, 31-45. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Pearson, Robert. E. and William Uricchio. 1991. *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media.* London: BFI Publishing.

Poe, Edgar Allan. 1984. *Poetry and Tales.* New York: Library of America.

Prince, Michael J. 2011. 'Alan Moore's America: The Liberal Individual and American Identities in Watchmen'. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44 (4): 815-830. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00864.x

Prince, Michael J. 2015. '(Re)visioning America in the Graphic Novel: Introduction'. *European Journal of American Studies* 10 (2). doi: 10.4000/ejas.10862

Williams, Paul and James Lyons. 2010. "Introduction: In the Year 3794". In *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* edited by Paul Williams & J. Lyons, xi-xxiv. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

# **Notes**

---

[1] Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics* (1993), which Prince cites, is the most prominent example of this counter-argument. In histories of the graphic novel the dominant opinion is easy to question, as both Sabin and Prince do, by disassociating the graphic novel from the superhero genre and demonstrating a history for the form that stretches well beyond the sudden success of two superhero comics in 1986.

[2] My reference in this essay is to the expanded second edition of the text. The first edition was published in 1977.

[3] This introduction is not printed in newer editions of the book, after a public difference of opinion between the two writers, and between Moore and DC Comics.

[4] Readers familiar with both texts will no doubt be able to see other parallels between the two works. As one example, Moore's inerstion of the 'Tale of the Black Freighter' portions of *Watchmen* borrows from formal techniques of *Moby Dick* as well reading as a similar gothic sea-faring narrative that leads to quasi-religious revelation.

[5] References to *Watchmen* follow the graphic novel pagination, using Roman numerals for chapter/issue and Arabic for page.