Dark Ages

A Study of 1980s Superhero Comics and the Nineteenth-Century American Romance

Fred Francis

Abstract

This study seeks to redefine, and refine, the knowledge of the period in the 1980s and 1990s when the superhero comic is often considered to have gained cultural legitimacy. The repeated story of Anglo-American comics is that 1986 was the year when comics 'grew up', and serial comics bought in comics shops and read by teenage boys became graphic novels bought by adults in bookshops. Studies in comics have a long history of attempting to challenge or revise this narrative. However, in the world of superhero comics the importance of works like Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* has meant that a version of the 1986 narrative is repeated, often implicitly, throughout studies of the form. As studies in comics becomes increasingly institutionalised, and a tacit canon of Anglo-American comics is formed in the process, a better understanding of why, and how, this narrative retains its power is necessary. This thesis provides an in-depth examination of the texts of this key moment, often referred to as the 'Dark Age'.

The thesis begins with the premise that American pulp comics have a history of positioning themselves in relation to traditions of American prose literature. This history provides some context for the thesis's central observation that the key texts of the Dark Age – Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore's *Watchmen*, *Arkham Asylum* by Grant Morrison, and *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman – contain formal correspondences with and direct allusions to the tradition of American Romance exemplified by Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. When these correspondences and allusions are examined, it becomes clear that the increased cultural legitimacy of the comics of the Dark Age was in large part driven by authors and publishers who were aware of the status of the superhero comic, and had enough cultural capital to attempt to change it. The comics of the Dark Age sought to negotiate a new position for themselves by drawing on the same models of legitimisation

and even the same terminology – such as the word 'dark' – that had been used previously by the Dark Romance. By making a virtue of gothic horror, and incorporating responses to their contemporary political discourse, they signalled that the books were intended for an adult, educated readership.

With this initial argument in place, the main body of the thesis is a detailed textual and historical study of four of the key works of the Dark Age. The various textual relationships of these works to the American Romance are highlighted, drawing from techniques in gothic studies to pay particular attention to a series of narrative conventions that occur across several works. The conventions, and the deliberate allusions to earlier authors made by the writers, are used to offer new readings of the works. These readings emphasise the comics writer's relationship to prose literature, and draw out the historical contexts that are similar or shared across the 130-year gap between the two periods. These readings also take account of the ways in which twentieth-century history and intellectual culture has shaped the texts, and considers their politics in this light. Ultimately, each chapter presents the works of the Dark Age both as individual and idiosyncratic texts and as a group of works shaped by the same nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses. The thesis as a whole argues that placing these texts in the context of an American literary history produces a more effective understanding of this prominent moment in comics history.

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Introduction

In the Anglosphere, comics have a well-worn story. For many, the idea of the comic book begins with grainy images of Captain America punching Hitler. This picture might give way to the bright colours of the 1960s, as Spider-Man or the Fantastic Four face off against another cosmic menace, and then fade into the barely-there outfits, exaggerated bodies, and impossible poses of the superheroes of recent memory. For others, the story might be set in the United Kingdom, and conjure memories of Dan Dare, the *Beano*, or the grimacing Judge Dredd. Perhaps some might think of the underground tradition of Robert Crumb or *Wimmen's Comix*, or the gallery art of Roy Lichtenstein or Raymond Pettibon. Today, many will think first of an item in a bookshop: a graphic novel, a graphic memoir, a graphic biography. Some may not even think of comics at all, but the screen: Adam West becomes Michael Keaton becomes George Clooney becomes Christian Bale. Like a lot of popular culture, the familiar associations of comics bely their complicated cultural position.

The year 1986 has a special place in most of these stories. This was the year comics 'grew up', and brought together these disparate narratives. Beginning in 1984, or thereabouts, a small group of writers, mainly at DC Comics, broke from the conventions of the costumed hero to write comics marked by a literary sensibility toward narrative and a thematic return to the American traditions of noir, fantasy, gothic, and supernatural horror. At the same time, the underground comix scene of the 1960s and 70s mutated into alternative comics – writing against the American superhero mainstream and pushing toward the status of culturally legitimate art enjoyed by Franco-Belgian *bandes dessinées*. The collocation of these two movements came to a head in 1986, as American comics entered the public consciousness as an object of interest for a literate, adult readership. The near simultaneous publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*

Returns and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* as collected editions prompted a cultural re-imagining of the comic book. Now available in bookstores, and reviewed by the mainstream press, comics were no longer confined to the bedrooms of teenage boys. The writers and artists of this new wave were responsible for the legitimisation of comics, and particularly superhero comics, within Anglophone culture. Their reward was a combination of literary and critical success largely unsurpassed to this day.

Like many well-known stories, this one is not exactly true to the facts. Roger Sabin's *Adult Comics*, published in 1993, pushed the origins of the adult-oriented comic back to the nineteenth century, with significant developments occurring throughout the twentieth. Most importantly, Sabin made clear that the adult comic had never been tied to the superhero genre, and the recent 'development' to recognise comics as a medium independent from their most well-known content was little more than a correction to the historical record (1993: 1). Sabin's attempt to shed the associations of the spandex-clad superhero, rightly emphasising that the medium and the superhero narrative are not intrinsically bound, was part of a larger trend. In the 1990s, comics studies pioneers such as Sabin or Scott McCloud built on the commercial visibility of comics after the 1980s to present a challenge to the ideas of comics as a second-rate art form in academic or cultural spheres. Their work involved acknowledging that superhero content had played a part in forming the barrier to acceptance: the popular American superhero comics that dominated the form for much of the twentieth century were often little more than flimsy plots holding together morally didactic tales of costumed white men punching 'bad guys'. Although today comics studies is beginning to find a place in the academy and in popular culture, somewhat ironically boosted by the twenty-first century dominance of the superhero at the box office, the acceptance of comics has been slow and partial. In many cases, the narrative that comics 'grew up' in 1986 has not helped.

Although the 1986 *annus mirabilis* narrative has been challenged by the progress toward making the comic book an acceptable object of interest, the persistence and

prevalence of the idea is surprising. In a recent example from the *European Journal of American Studies*, Michael J. Prince repeats the familiar story of the works that changed comics when he states that 'the year 1986 stands as a watershed in this history of the graphic novel' (2015). This history, Prince suggests, rests on an initial wave of praise for the major works of 1986 when they were first published. Yet, at least in terms of content and history, *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* share very little with *Maus*. Whilst *Maus* was a landmark in the alternative comics tradition, *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* are unabashedly superhero comics, of the type that had contributed to comics' poor reputation. Within their genre, their status as revolutionary works is such that, according to Geoff Klock, superhero comics since their publication have been 'a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore' (2002: 4). The same is rarely said of *Maus*, despite its importance. Whilst its success is no doubt partly the reason for the current success of autobiographical and memoir comics, it did not revitalise its genre's ailing reputation. Nor did all comics memoirs suddenly follow Spiegelman's narrative innovations, to create a rash of parent-talking-to-child memoirs told with anthropomorphised rodents. Yet, this is exactly what happened to superhero comics: for some reason, after *Watchmen*, almost the entire field shifted towards this landmark work.

Within the superhero genre, the saturation of the market by subsequent imitations means the idea of a turning point in 1986 is harder to shake off. The significance of Miller and Moore, in this case, is an accepted fact that could be demonstrated by even a brief survey of the market. For this reason, it is worth separating this genre in particular – America's most popular – from the wider changes to the comic book industry and culture of the 1980s. Moreover, debates over the history and status of works like *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* have now established themselves as part of the discourse of comics studies. Just as Prince chooses to single out these two alongside *Maus* when repeating the story in his introduction to a journal's special issue on the graphic novel, very few university courses or modules in comics or graphic novels are complete without one, or

more, of these texts. The rapid institutionalisation of comics in academia is tacitly establishing a canon of the Western graphic novel which gives a central place to the story of the changes brought about by *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. In light of the shaky foundations on which this institutionalisation is taking place, it is worth addressing the Miller/Moore pairing, and the broader developments of what came to be called the 'Dark Age', in greater detail.

When the importance of the 1986 works of Miller and Moore is so regularly asserted, it should be noted that even citing these two as a single event, let alone including *Maus*, is problematic. There are many obvious similarities between *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* that go beyond just publication date. Alongside works like Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, there is a clear trend towards a darker aesthetic, more explicitly violent content, and a more complex consideration of the role of the hero in the late 1980s. As Frank Miller put it: 'I guess I was looking to bring comics a bit more of an edge' (Daniels 1995: 190). Whilst it is useful as a starting point to establish this trend, a more thorough investigation might ask what caused it to happen. At the same time, the generalities in my description gloss over substantial differences between the texts. Today, the writers of the Dark Age are defined by their differences just as they were previously bracketed together. Frank Miller barely retains credibility after his most recent works and interviews became increasingly right-wing and xenophobic whilst Alan Moore concentrates on writing about his home town of Northampton, and is committed to left-wing anarchism. These two trajectories point to very different politics and places of origin for their texts.

A more nuanced approach to the relationship between the texts and the moment that produced them should not disregard the case for the significance of the works, or their similarity, but should also take account of the differences that determine the texts and re-assess a narrative codified some thirty years ago. It is germane to ask what lay behind the near-simultaneous turn towards gothic and fantasy writing by a number of different writers

of different backgrounds, and what cultural context existed for this move. One might also ask how different the American superhero comic written by Moore is to *The Dark Knight Returns*. It is reasonable to suppose there are many different versions of the American superhero, and of America itself, among the works of the 1980s since the period is also regularly noted as exceptional for the hiring of Moore and other British writers. In the context of a genre concerned enough with national identity to have produced characters like Captain America and Captain Britain, place is of some importance and the idea of an 'American superhero' must be reconciled with the developing transatlantic point-of-view that these changing circumstances imply. Perhaps most importantly, underlying these questions, is the problem of what exactly the 'Dark Age' of the 1980s was. The story of 1986 covers everything from changing global politics, to new hiring policies at DC, to new marketing methods for the comic book. Under such a broad umbrella, could any periodisation be useful?

This thesis aims to investigate these issues and draw together the old narrative, detailed textual scholarship, and new methods of comics studies that look to global contexts of production and readership. It does so by proceeding from a specific insight that has previously gone unconsidered: the major superhero comics that exhibit the tendency toward gothic aesthetics and narrative sophistication in the second half on the 1980s deliberately position themselves as part of a literary tradition that has its roots in the antebellum United States. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller retells Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' as Bruce Wayne searches for his purpose as Batman. *Arkham Asylum* borrows the narrative pattern of Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether'. The *Sandman* story 'Hob's Leviathan' is a gender-switched retelling of *Moby Dick*. Alan Moore has stated he intended *Watchmen* to be 'the *Moby Dick* of comics' (Eno and Csawza 2006). In these examples, and many more throughout the texts, the writers of these comics find a parallel to their own work in the American Romance. In this thesis, I will argue that reading these texts alongside the tradition with which they align themselves works against the typical narrative

of a series of 'copycat' capitalisations on the commercial success of Miller and Moore, and begins to make sense of the 'Dark Age'.

My thesis therefore proceeds from the following arguments. Firstly, comics history proposes a moment, sometimes called the Dark Age, where superhero comics 'grew up' and gained cultural legitimacy. Secondly, there are demonstrable moments of deliberate similarity between the Dark Age of American superhero comics and the canon of the American Dark Romance. From these facts, it is possible to produce a new reading of the Dark Age that revises current assumptions about the texts individually and the moment as a whole. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that reading the Dark Age for its relationships with an earlier moment of literary history opens up the works to individual exegeses that take account of the contemporary politics and culture of their moment, a shared set of influences, and a divergent set of politics among the major authors of the moment. Ultimately, they are revealed as texts with complex and radical relationships to American literary and political culture. The outcome of this approach is to increase both the in-depth knowledge and the broader understanding of a significant moment for comics history and literary history. My results have implications for current thought about the cultural positioning and the achievements of the comics of the mid-1980s, as well as for the long-term view of the traditions of American literature.

Background

Superhero stories, across all media, have long proclaimed their relationship to traditions of prose literature to anyone who would listen. My argument begins with the premise that each writer of the Dark Age has affinities with, and makes direct reference to, the gothic writing of authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe. To understand how writers at a particular moment in the 1980s were able to transform the story of superhero comics with this 'innovation', a brief history is in order that places

their efforts in the context of a longstanding negotiation for position between comics and literature. This history reveals that the stage was set for the Dark Age by decades of effort by writers and publishers to find literary antecedents for the superhero comic.

If the story begins anywhere, it begins in the Bronx. All across the east coast of the United States, the writing of the American Renaissance is memorialised as part of a cultural remembrance and myth-making process. Historic residences and museums in Salem, Boston, New York, and other major cities preserve the memory of a moment of literary creativity that brought forth Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, and many others. Poe Park, in the Bronx, is a minor feature in these terms. The park is home to a small cottage in the northern corner, where Poe lived for just three years towards the end of his life in the 1840s. The cottage is something of a curiosity within the system of memorial-making, since Poe is not a writer best associated with New York and few of his major works were written at the cottage. Today the park contains a dedicated visitor centre as well as the preserved cottage but, tucked away from Manhattan, the location is hardly one of the city's most precious cultural landmarks. Promotional material for the park tacitly acknowledges its status as a relatively minor attraction. To bolster the stature of the site, it emphasises a secondary claim for the importance of the location: in the 1930s, Bill Finger and Bob Kane met in the same park, not far from the cottage, to sketch out ideas for their new superhero, the Batman (NYC Parks).

The synchronicity of the two histories is worth noting. Despite achieving significant fame as a writer in his lifetime, Poe's position in the American literary tradition was contested well into the twentieth century on the grounds of his politics, content, or style (Peeples 2004: 64ff). Just as Poe's gothic magazine tales took some time to become a legitimate artefact worthy of memorialisation, so too did the superhero comic only belatedly become part of the state's cultural identity to be celebrated. That the two also share a gothic and fantastic aesthetic and a pulp or disposable publishing medium is surely no coincidence. Today, the synchronicity of the park's two claims to literary heritage is

borne out by the shape and use of the space. The park's visitor centre is built with a sloped roof that 'represents the raven's wings extended' (NYC Parks), but has made use of the area's importance to comics to host more than one exhibition of the medium. 'Living in Sequence', in 2013, focused on the comics history of the Bronx and reviews inevitably made the connection between Poe's gothic horror and the dark, shadowy presence of the Batman (Lee 2013). Bound together by a historical coincidence, today the cultural preservation of Poe has been extended to draw the superhero comic under its wing.

Whilst the process of institutionalisation connects Poe to Batman by a geographical accident, tracing a different line of descent demonstrates the historical relationship of influence between the two forms. The nineteenth-century magazine culture that had incubated Poe and the American gothic tale continued to grow as mass production techniques developed. Into the 1920s, fiction magazines remained America's most popular leisure activity for adults (Jones 2005: 52), although the aspirations to high society of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and *Burton's Magazine* were far less popular than titles like *Ranch Romances* and *True Ghost Stories*. The pulp boom of the early twentieth-century saw a vast increase in magazine short fiction, much of which drew on the nineteenth-century vogue for physical fitness, true crime, and pseudo-scientific magazines to produce detective, science-fiction, and muscular male hero stories. Not only did these inspire the writers of the first superhero stories, but many of the same publishers were responsible for America's first comic books. After a combination of increasing regulation and competition in magazine fiction forced them to seek new markets, magazine companies began diversifying their publishing and distribution business by reprinting syndicated newspaper cartoon strips in magazine form (Jones 2005: 102-108). Seen in this light, both the narratives and the industrial history of the pulp magazines acts as a bridge between the magazine fictions of Washington Irving, Poe, and Hawthorne, and the marketing of superhero comics to American boys in the 1940s.

Despite the historical and narrative connections between comics and American literature that can be traced to the nineteenth-century, the cultural divisions enacted in the twentieth kept the two forms apart. For many of the early years of Batman, public perception and intellectual discourse policed a divide between high art and low popular culture that was tied to the market forces of mass-produced entertainment. Lawrence Levine has demonstrated that the certain aspects of the 'shared culture' of the nineteenth-century were hived off from the marketplace at the turn of the century, and placed instead in cultural institutions that determined the terms on which they could be accessed, and with which they were to be discussed. The result was both an 'exaggerated antithesis' in the categories used to discuss culture – a divide between 'high' and 'low', and a turn to new forms. When 'high' literature, art, and music were removed from the shared culture, Americans:

> Satisfied their aesthetic cravings though a number of the new forms of expressive culture that were barred from high culture by the very fact of their accessibility to the masses: the blues, jazz or jazz-derived music, musical comedy, photography, comic strips, movies, radio, popular comedians, all of which, though relegated to the nether world culturally, in fact frequently contained much that was fresh, exciting, innovative, intellectually challenging, and highly imaginative.

The result, Levine argues, was not only a broad separation of forms that had been associated and enjoyed in conjunction during the nineteenth-century, but a series of 'rigid cultural categories' that promulgated the understanding that widely accessible forms were devoid of artistic and cultural value (Levine 1988: 230-232).

Having developed as a deliberately disposable medium, and targeting children as their key market, comics were highly susceptible to this discourse. The cultural divide in

America, and the subsequent moral panic over comics' content in the 1950s, produced a climate in which the American superhero comic had very little to do with American literature, at least in the popular imagination. The divide was in direct opposition to the obvious and persistent evidence of literary influence and aspiration throughout the early years of the mass-market comic. As Julia Round notes, 'the earliest horror comics were adaptations' and Shelley, Stevenson, and other figureheads of nineteenth-century fiction featured regularly as influences or sources (2014: 27). The publisher EC, in particular, made liberal use of the American literary tradition. Nearly all of EC's anthology titles adapted the format of the twist ending popularised by O. Henry, whilst producing titles designed to appeal to fans of particular pulp genres. *Tales from the Crypt* offered horror, and adapted both Lovecraft and Poe; *Crime Suspenstories* borrowed from the hard-boiled tradition; *Weird Fantasy* (and several others) drew a science-fiction audience and often adapted Ray Bradbury. Occasionally, the comics used the model of the short story to deliver anti-racist or progressive political messages for which these comics are justly remembered today (Nyberg 1998: 64-65). In each case, whether moral lesson, gruesome entertainment, or both, the comics were an amalgam of nineteenth-century 'high' literature and twentieth-century pulp.

However, the writing of comics with a literary influence was hamstrung by the introduction of industry self-regulation in the 1950s. Comic-book publishers faced public concern and the threat of government regulation after the publication of Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. In response, the Comics Code Authority was established in 1954. The CCA represents one of the most important moments in the history of American comics, and histories of comics dwell over the far-reaching effects certification had on the industry. For my purposes, the most important point is that the CCA as an act of self-regulation fundamentally limited the narrative possibilities of the superhero genre, and for other genres went so far as to effectively remove the majority of titles from

the market. Whilst comics of all genres faced challenges in the era of the moral panic, and a majority found their writing and art had to change to conform to the Comics Code, horror and crime anthology books suffered most – at least in the mainstream. Comics were limited or prevented entirely from using 'crime', 'horror' or 'terror' in the title, and the majority of horror monsters were banned (Wright 2001: 172). The changes left EC unable to publish the work for which it cornered the market; no surprise, some have suggested, since the Code was drafted by EC's competition in the industry (Nyberg 1998: 122). With these strictures in place, the replication of American gothic and hard-boiled crime fiction in comics was hardly possible, and EC – as well as several other publishers whose focus was crime and horror – left the market. Instead, 'as comic-book makers negotiated the often-conflicting pressures of self-censorship, political culture, and market demands, a compromise emerged in reluctant superheroes' (Wright 2001: 180-81). Fighting a massive slump in sales following regulation and the rise of television as popular entertainment, comics narrative that aspired to the complexity or quality of literary fiction was barely possible. The solution for DC, Batman's publisher, was in fantastic superhero stories, where sophisticated visuals that challenged television's limited special-effects could be combined with morally acceptable tales where good won out over evil, authority was respected, and nonconformity was punished (Wright 2001: 185).

In treating comics as a danger to children, and limiting their narrative possibilities, the moral panic over comics in the 1950s cemented a cultural divide between comics and 'literature' that would continue for the next thirty years. The 1971 revision to the Comics Code is compelling evidence for the existence of this divide in the minds of the Code's authors. Revising the Code to allow for some form of horror comics to operate, the new rules 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 (H.H. Munro), Conan Doyle and other respected authors' (Nyberg 1998: 172). The authors whose work had been the foundation of the crime and horror

comics that had initially provoked the development of the Comics Code Authority were now being held up as a measure of 'high calibre' literature to which comics should aspire but were not admitted. In an unusual measure that pre-empts the tendencies of the 1980s, gothic and horror comics will only be permitted if they deliberately resemble nineteenth-century writers. It is in this proclamation that the seeds of a movement that would radically change the public perception of the superhero comic can be detected.

In 1971, the same year as the revisions to the code, Marvel's *Spider-Man* had foregone CCA certification in order to include a story featuring drug use. Marvel argued the story should be exempt from the Code on the grounds of its public importance. Although depicting drug use was not permitted by the Code, the story focused on the consequences of addiction at a time when drugs had succeeded comics as the moral panic of the United States (Nyberg 1998: 139). A similar addiction storyline featured in DC's *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* in the same year. Together, the stories marked a move for the superhero comic to become more topical and political, responding to the post-1960s United States. A year prior, *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* had published an explicitly anti-racist challenge to the cosmic outlook of the comic. The story harked back to the attitudes of EC, which had faced censure for its depiction of a black astronaut in the 1950s (Nyberg 1998: 122). Whilst DC's mainstream superheroes began to test the limits of the Code with moral and political stories, Joe Orlando was working as editor of DC's *House of Mystery*, a relatively minor horror anthology that had continued in a toned-down form after the introduction of the CCA. During the period of challenge to the code in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *House of Mystery* saw a significant gain in readers and plaudits and established itself as a 'key' precursor to the gothic comics of the 1980s (Round 2014: 45). The major publishers were beginning to broaden their narrative content, and use political and literary references to challenge the strictures of the Code. Evidently, this narrative innovation and political commentary (although of a rudimentary kind) also brought about financial success.

Observing these changes was Karen Berger, who began working at DC in 1979 and became editor of *House of Mystery*, succeeding Orlando, in 1981. Her next position was as editor for a promising new writer hired from the British SF comics scene – Alan Moore. Moore had been hired to write *Swamp Thing*, which had begun in *House of Mystery*'s sister title *House of Secrets* and emerged in its own book as one of the successes of the 1970s horror revival. Working alongside Moore were Stephen Bissette, Rick Veitch, and John Totleben – artists with a background in horror and alternative comics. For these artists' early works, following the Comics Code had not been an issue: alternative comics were not sold through newsagents – who refused to carry titles not certified by the CCA – and so featured gore, sex, and politics as a matter of course. The combination of an editor with a knowledge of horror comics and an interest in developing the narrative potential of the form, and writers and artists coming from satirical and less restrictive backgrounds was potent. Under Berger, *Swamp Thing* was rewarded, both critically and financially, for dispensing with the traditions and codes of the superhero comic in favour of an increase in visual and verbal horror and sexuality, experimental narrative, and political commentary.

Swamp Thing was the first DC comic to abandon the CCA mark, although others would soon follow (Baetens and Frey 2015: 77). The cover of issue #31, where the mark was removed, added the tagline 'Sophisticated Suspense'. The subtle replacement, warning the reader of the content within (or enticing them toward it), indicates that the major publishers had begun to deliberately collocate previously censured content with literary merit. The success of the move prompted further changes, and DC established a system of foregoing the code for some comics in lieu of their own branding reading: 'Suggested for Mature Readers'. As with 'Sophisticated Suspense', the dual meaning of 'mature' is as much invitation as caution, pointing to an emphasis on the relationship between horror, sex, and violence, and intellectual or high-status writing. The most obvious beneficiaries of the changes at DC were the writers with the cachet to challenge received opinion about the superhero story, and the craft to write intellectual and innovative superhero stories aimed at

a 'sophisticated' audience. In particular, two writers had proved themselves in these terms in the early 1980s: Frank Miller, who had made his name with *Daredevil* at Marvel, and Alan Moore on *Swamp Thing*.

The decision to remove the CCA accreditation marks a moment where distribution and sales models for comics, and the age and attitudes of the reading audience, had changed enough that following the Comics Code was not a necessary condition to produce a financially viable publication. The changing markets of the 1980s offered other new possibilities for comics writers and publishers. Roger Sabin suggests that, in financial terms, Moore's and Miller's works were concurrent with the rise of the "graphic novel" as a marketing proposal (1993: 93). During the 1980s, both Marvel and DC began to market successful comics in collected editions, as well as producing original works published first in the longer form. Trading on the legitimacy-by-association of the novel, the graphic novel craze of the 1980s became a 'cultural phenomenon' and object of media discourse: 'the graphic novel was promoted as new kind of literature with new "authors"' (Baetens and Frey 2015: 85). In tandem with the development of the dark or gothic aesthetic and the partial abandonment of the Comics Code, the idea of the graphic novel rested on a newfound depth of social and political content. Moreover, it contained stories that were discrete, rather than the ongoing continuities on which the superhero narrative had previously relied. These tenets opened the medium to readers in search of more sophisticated content, without the need for a long or complex backstory gained through years of reading serial comic books.

This purpose of this historical outline is to show that in form, content, and cultural positioning, the future of the medium as it stood in the latter half of the 1980s depended upon invoking the terms of prose culture. The situation is summed up by Tim Sale in a recent edition of *The Killing Joke*, where he proposes that the success of the superhero comic depends on 'creators of extraordinary craft,' whose gift is for 'making the old seem new' (Moore and Bolland 2008). His statement is true for those writers who can rewrite a

pre-existing character, or find a new angle on an old story, but it is equally true for the medium itself. The writers of comics before 1954 were well aware that they were indebted to nineteenth-century literature, and built on these traditions for their success. The rediscovery of Poe and the American Romance in the 1980s is a case of making the 'old seem new', as writers aligned their work with a pre-Code horror comics tradition as well as a literary heritage. The legitimisation process of the American gothic tale, from its beginnings in pulp magazines to its memorialisation in public parks, offered an example for the superhero comic to follow. The writers who were positioned to take advantage of the changing industry in the 1980s looked to a previous moment of literary history, preserved as part of America's cultural identity, for their inspiration.

Methodology 1: Defining a Dark Age

As the common version of the story goes, the Dark Age is largely responsible for any acceptability with adult readers which superhero comics now enjoy. The moment that produced the works was the culmination of a historical process towards the legitimisation of the mass-market comic, which afforded writers with a literary sensibility and commensurate skill the space to develop morally ambiguous, complex characters engaged in complete, book-form narratives. It is my purpose in this thesis to analyse this moment in more detail, and refine our understanding of the works within a broader literary and cultural field. As the first stage of this process, before the developments and major works of the Dark Age can be fully investigated, it will be necessary to determine exactly what is meant by a 'Dark Age' of comics. In the generally understood history of the superhero comic, the inaugural 'golden age' is followed by the 'silver age' that bore most of today's familiar characters, and then by the topical push-back against the Code of the 'bronze age' (Kaveney 2007: 18). 'Dark Age' as a term originates in this fan-driven popular history but, like much popular history, the use of the term is contested. At the same time, in the

growing academic discipline of comics studies, reading the gothic aspect of comics from a background in gothic literary theory is an emerging and productive methodology. Therefore, at the historical moment where comics step out into the light of cultural legitimacy, their 'darkness' is a site of debate. Any study of the Dark Age as a significant moment must first outline what exactly is meant by this moment, and when it occurred.

Among superhero comics scholars and fandom, the 'Dark Age' is a familiar but somewhat nebulous concept. Most commonly, the term refers to a trend of 'ultra-violent late-80s and early-90s popular "superheroes"' based on the success of Miller and Moore (Fleming 2005). In these readings, the success of *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* spawned a legion of imitators, and a general identification of a Dark Age comic can be made simply by a single narrative feature (violence) and a publishing date. Almost every account follows the same pattern. Violence and 'moody shadows' are features typical to works of the period, following the aesthetic and narrative features established by Moore and Miller (Klock 2002: 65). Mixed in with the focus on aesthetic 'darkness', a return to the horror comic tradition or other early forms of pulp literature is occasionally cited as a feature of the moment. Looking to comics' history, Kaveney suggests that the Dark Age is an exposition of the inherent 'noir' aspect which the superhero comic 'has always' contained (2007: 7).

Paradoxically, some accounts that note the return to earlier gothic forms in the Dark Age also emphasise that the period was brought about by a break with tradition. Mark Voger's version of the Dark Age notes 'harbingers' in comics leading back to Batman's inception in 1937 but also makes DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) and Marvel's *Secret Wars* (1984-85) the immediate precursors to the moment (2006: 13-17). Particularly in the case of *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* these storylines were attempts to resolve the problem of 'metacontinuity': the creation and disruption of narrative consistency across publisher's multiple titles. Pre-*Crisis,* DC had used the narrative construct of many co-existing parallel universes to account for different versions of characters through the company's history.

Crisis told the story of the destruction of these alternate universes as a way of killing off variant characters, shaking up ongoing narratives established over decades, and paving the way for new writers and new versions of the superhero (see also Wantdke 2012: 88). In Voger's argument, the dark comics of the 1980s hark back to the pre-Code days *and* rely on this abandonment of long-term continuity that had preserved narratives across some fifty years of publishing. The Dark Age then begins to look like both a return and a new beginning. For Klock, the moment is concerned with revision and misreadings: consciously breaking from the trends of the previous developments in superhero comics to offer an alternate take on the possibilities of the superhero narrative (2002: 25).

Works like Voger's that explicitly use the term Dark Age are generally fan-oriented histories. These are invaluable as a guide to the perception of the moment within comics culture but, as is often the case with works aimed at the fan rather than the academy, they lack the methodology to support a more complex investigation. A similar problem occurs with the use of the alternative term 'modern age', a proposed counterpart to the idea of the Dark Age that can mean anything in comics post-1980 (e.g. Royal 2013). Modern Age is undoubtedly useful for a broad history of comics but its breadth can lead to vagueness, variously encompassing developments such as the rise of independent publishers, changes to creator rights, and the boom-and-bust of the superhero comic collector's market. Where 'Dark Age' is often an aesthetic or narrative term which does not satisfy collectors or those interested in material histories, 'modern age' is broad but says little about content. In the search for useful and accurate terminology, the divisions between methods and between often competing and flawed accounts of comics history are exposed.

For an academic study in this developing field, care must be taken to balance new discipline-specific approaches imposed upon popular culture with the wealth of pre-existing creator and fan studies. As the contested terminology I have described indicates, the state of fan discourse is invaluable source material that helps shape current debates and responses to the topic. Similarly, the wealth of interviews, ephemera and paratextual

material created and recorded for the interest of fans rather than scholars forms a vital part of the material for this thesis. Often, the boundaries between fan culture and academia are not clear. Some works, like Kaveney's, straddle a borderline: written by experts outside the academy, they combine historical or analytical insight with a personal or popular tone. However, acknowledging the importance of these debates does not mean accepting their arguments. On the other end of the spectrum, as comics studies has developed, new academic readings shed welcome light on the ideas of a periodisation of comics by looking to a broader cultural and aesthetic heritage.

A more specific version of the shift from aesthetic to material approaches indicated by the desire to subsume 'dark within 'modern' can be seen in current area-focused approaches to comics. Exemplified by collections like *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* (Denson, Meyer, and Stein 2013) and *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (Williams and Lyons 2010), these studies offer ways of seeing comics within a larger national and international framework and add a methodological rigour to the debate. Rather than grouping works by aesthetic similarity, they lead to new ways of understanding moments in comics history as phenomena affected or brought about by external factors such as global distribution networks, readerships, or political cultures. On the other hand, the importance of reading aesthetic content is maintained in new studies that site the comics of the Dark Age within a longer tradition of literary scholarship. Best represented by Julia Round's *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (2014), and the collection *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (Green 2013), these texts look to a literary history for an explanation of the aesthetic features noted by the fan-critics and historians. In academia, the aesthetic and the area-focused approaches are complementary (as the appearance of writers in more than one of the exemplar texts suggests). Williams and Lyons use the 'imprecise' periodisation based on the 1986 comics as a necessary starting point (2010: xii-xiii), just as Matthew Green's aesthetically delimited collection depends upon a transnational approach to the production of Moore's

comics. In both cases, the idea of the Dark Age hovers at the edge of the rationale for the volumes. Recognising this, any definition of the moment must incorporate both the material and the aesthetic facets of the comics.

Round's book, in particular, is valuable both as an overview of research on the gothic in comics (her history of gothic comics is the basis for the synopsis I offer above) and a methodology. Her gothic mode of reading comics builds on established literary theory, whilst maintaining the importance of the transnational and transhistorical culture of production. Whilst the work is significant enough to recur throughout this thesis, it establishes three points that are crucial to outline at this stage. Firstly, Round demonstrates that the comics produced at DC/Vertigo during the late 1980s and 1990s are gothic texts (9, 43ff). Secondly, these gothic comics can be understood through a method that considers the narrative, structural, and formal aspects of the gothic text (112ff). Thirdly, these methods reveal a process of absorption and intertextuality as a feature of the gothic comic (155ff). Round's text is, by her own admittance, only an 'initial' demonstration of possibilities and there is certainly more to be drawn from these valuable conclusions (229). In the case of this thesis, following the path established by Round confirms that there is potential for the application of gothic literary theory to the study of a moment determined by 'darkness'.

Round's work in connecting a 'dark' aesthetic and literary gothic begins to make sense of the relationship between the Dark Age and its antebellum precursor. A similar terminology of 'dark' shared between comics of the 1980s with literary studies of the American Romance, suggests there is a historical weight to the term waiting to be uncovered. As Teresa Goddu points out, the use of the word 'dark' in relation to American fiction has a long heritage, and combines aesthetic judgements with coded cultural values. The general use of 'dark' has been to erase the term 'gothic' from American literary criticism, particularly as a modifier for 'Romance' when referring to the canon of nineteenth-century writing that begins with Charles Brockden Brown and centres around Hawthorne and Melville. For Goddu, the adoption of 'dark' or 'black' to describe works

considered to be vital to the creation of an American literature is a tactic that avoids the unpalatable connotations of 'gothic', despite the evidence of a shared heritage and influence from the European supernatural and Romantic tale. Replacing 'gothic' with 'dark' elevates the works in question as foundations of an American literary tradition, rather than denigrates them as melodrama – an essential part of the American cultural myth-making process. In effect, 'dark' emphasises an underlying 'profound' quality to the work rather than the superficial spectacle: 'American literature's darkness […] becomes associated with depth rather than surface, a psychological and metaphysical symbolism rather than cheap tricks' (1997: 7). Goddu's intent is to resurrect the critical terminology of the gothic, rightly pointing out the 'intimate relationship' between gothic and the Romance.

Goddu's desire to destabilise the terminology of American literature targets in particular Harry Levin's *Power of Blackness.* Levin's work, one of the most significant of the various mid-twentieth century efforts to cement an American literary canon, groups Hawthorne, Melville and Poe's 'dark wisdom' as one entity. Levin uses 'dark' and 'black' deliberately as a contrast to 'light' in his study of the three authors, linking the dark/light pair to the Biblical contradictory pair of Genesis and Apocalypse (1976: 29). The goal of Levin's argument is to group the writers as anti-Transcendentalists, positioning their darkness in opposition to the philosophical optimism exemplified by Emerson. However, Goddu rightly points out that there is problematic (and paradoxical) absence within this opposition. Taking up Toni Morrison's reflection on erased black life in *Playing in the Dark*, Goddu suggests that constructing 'darkness' or 'blackness' in this way removes the importance of race from the terminology. Seeking to recover the role of race in American fiction, Goddu points out that the importance of the subaltern is more often maintained in the idea of an 'American gothic' (1997: 8).

Building on Goddu's work, Levin's terminology perhaps maintains an associative value when subsumed *under* the idea of gothic. Both Goddu and a similar work, Williams' *Art of Darkness*, emphasise the problematic status of 'Gothic' as a concept that resists

detailed clarification – a problem that recurs through studies of the term (Williams 1995: 17; Goddu 1997: 5, 8). They also find a shared methodology from which to begin. The key identifier, both argue, is an othering and focus on the marginalised or oppositional category in a binary pair - the dark, the evil, the feminine, the Black, the southern (Williams 1995: 18-19; Goddu 1997: 11). Levin's effort to characterise the Romance in terms of a dark/light pair shares some features with this categorisation, but essentially institutes a different set of pairings – some features of the 'dark' anti-Transcendentalist writing are not features of gothic and vice-versa. In the light of the challenges made to his terminology by Goddu and by Williams, I would suggest understanding Levin's focus on 'dark' and 'black' as descriptive tools that denote a particular sub-type of gothic writing. This 'dark' writing was an attempt by its writers to revise what was essentially gothic into something more easily understood without reference to the idea of a historically situated European Gothic tradition, and so more likely to be elevated to the status of high American literature. In the hands of critics, this 'dark' or 'black' movement also paradoxically becomes a way of creating a white, male movement that does not admit itself as gothic.

I have concentrated above on examples of the revisionary analyses of the particular descriptor 'dark' in Levin's account of the nineteenth-century canon, and demonstrated the ongoing relevance of the term for subsequent developments in American fiction. However, underlying Levin's use of the word 'dark' is the act of canon-building itself that has grouped writers like Melville and Hawthorne together – a project that can be traced to Levin's immediate academic precursors. In fact, there is perhaps no term as well-used by the canon-builders of the mid-twentieth-century – and therefore as contested by scholarship today – as the word to which Levin prepends his descriptor 'dark'. Levin's project depends on the existing idea of the 'Romance', as does virtually all scholarship on nineteenth-century American fiction.

The 'Romance Theory' of American fiction has two essential starting points – Hawthorne's authorial commentary in his fiction that defines a distinction between the

novel and the Romance, and the group of American critics who sought to derive from this apparent divide a theory of American literature. Thompson and Link suggest the 'major voices of the Romance Theory of American fiction' were 'F. O. Matthiessen, Lionel Trilling, Charles Feidelson, Jr., R. W. B. Lewis, and, of course, Richard Chase'. On the other hand, in varieties of 'Anti-Romance' and 'Counter-Romance' position Thompson and Link include Nina Baym, Russell Reising, William Ellis, Donald Pease and the other contributors to the 1990 special issue of *boundary 2* on the subject (1999:20). In other words, when dealing in any way with the idea of the 'Dark Romance' one contends with and must negotiate between the vast majority of the most important critical figures in American literary scholarship. Whilst Thompson and Link's distinctions are necessarily rough, and by their own admission their work often falls short in key areas (1999: 193), this act of positioning gives some insight into the size of the task faced by new approaches to the topic.

Whilst this thesis could not hope to fulfil its primary purpose and also do justice to the depth of these debates, a statement of my position and my use of the term is therefore necessary at this stage. In 1984, Nina Baym argued that the idea of the 'romance' had been constructed by the critics of the mid-twentieth century in the effort to define a national tradition. In her words, 'the term romance turns out to have been used so broadly and so inconsistently in the era that in any given instance of trying to fix its meaning the critic or writer was evidently indulging in a creative rather than a descriptive activity' (1984: 430). Her argument was the first significant challenge to the Romance Theory. In essence, she argued against that critics too often followed Hawthorne's self-definition, and separated the 'romance' from the 'novel' to create a special category for American fiction. Her study contains numerous examples that indicate the distinction between the 'romance' and the 'novel' was not as historically situated as it had previously been seen. Whilst the Romance Theory may not have had firm ground, the ramifications of it as a creative activity, rather than as a historical fact, inform this thesis. The 'Dark Age' may not be a useful term in of

itself, but its use within the community of comics readers carries valuable information about the position and reception of these comics, and exactly the same is true of the Romance.

In this thesis, therefore, I preserve the term of the Romance to point to the ways in which this has been a constructed idea *about* American fiction that refers to a specific group of writers *of* American fiction. The national mythology of the Romance, as described and critiqued by Baym, Pease (1990), Reising (1990) and others, has a particular bearing on the understanding of what constitutes an American text. The ramifications of this understanding are such that Thompson and Link's overview of the Romance debate presents their reinstatement of the 'transatlantic aspect' of the Romance as their essential critical insight (1999: 192). Furthermore, just as is the case with 'dark', Romance retains – where perhaps its deployment attempted to hide – the historical relationship between the foundation of the American literary canon and the gothic. The 'gothic manifestations' of the romance tradition are of 'peculiar importance […] in defining the parameters of the American romance genre' (Thompson and Link 1999: 14).

The ramifications of the decisions and elisions of the term are felt throughout this thesis. In the chapter on Frank Miller, I argue that Miller saw the nineteenth-century Romance as the instigator of a particularly American tradition with which he wanted to align his work. In the chapter on Neil Gaiman, I consider that Hawthorne's description of the Romance shares features with Gaiman's gothic fiction – drawing out alignments between the gothic and the romance that the many varieties of the dominant 'Romance Theory' have overlooked in their desire to constitute an American tradition. Indeed, although only the crudest aggregated version of the typical Romance Theory, abstracted from the nuances of any of the works that individually describe it, would use the idea of the Romance as a dividing line between 'high' and 'low' culture, it is nonetheless the case that comic books have carried the weight of such a viewpoint. In his chapter on the *Bildungsroman* of the American comic book, which in itself points to the ways in which a

different theory drawn from a transatlantic romance tradition has hampered the legitimacy of comics, Christopher Pizzino highlights Leslie Fiedler's opposition to the *Classics Illustrated* series of comics as 'middlebrow mediocrity' (2016: 25). Fiedler, another major proponent of a variety of the Romance Theory, is only able to draw such a distinction with the benefit of a twentieth-century critical discourse. Once, the idea of 'romance' acted as defence or descriptor for sensationalist fiction – often published in magazines – that did not conform to the rules of reality (Thompson and Link 1999: 97-100). By the twentieth-century, it had become the marker of a privileged literature in a discourse that broke a nineteenth-century mass media culture into separate 'highbrow' and 'popular' spheres (Levine 1988: 230-232). By lifting this veil of respectability, and revealing the mass-media form beneath, the parallel between the 'romance' and comics' similar separation of mass-produced fantasy from literary work – most obviously connoted by the idea of the 'graphic novel' – are exposed.

I preserve, then, the totality of the phrase 'Dark Romance' to highlight the historical and critical features it shares with the idea of the 'Dark Age'. Both can be seen to be deliberately avoiding the connotations of melodrama in their search for cultural legitimacy, yet both are revealed as gothic moments by a literary criticism that strips them of pretensions and undermines cultural whitewashing. Viewed in this way, 'dark' is a valuable descriptor to periodise and help define ideas *within* the concept of 'gothic', as long as the literary criticism that rightly returns 'gothic' as the dominant descriptor is kept at the forefront. Similarly, 'romance' is a valuable term in that it speaks to the fantastic, gothic, and middlebrow realities of Hawthorne's fiction, as well as the nationalist implications of the way in which critics have grouped a number of writers under one tradition. Following the shared trajectory of using 'dark' to resist 'gothic', before having this terminology reinstated by criticism that resists the pretension that comes with self-definition, the similarities between the two moments of literary history begin to coalesce.

For these reasons, in this study I will retain the term 'Dark Age' to denote several inter-related features of comics from the 1980s and connote the literary-historical relationships necessary to understanding these texts. Most significantly, the trend that began with *Swamp Thing* in 1984 for the combination of noir and gothic aesthetics is historically correlated with the changes to narrative content and marketing denoted by the publishers as 'sophisticated', 'mature', or 'adult'. These changes are brought about by new production teams with a background in horror and underground comics, a transatlantic makeup or outlook, and an awareness of the cultural negotiation between comics and 'high' literature. This moment of revising the superhero narrative, with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* as its first major exemplar, has a comparable moment well over a century earlier where 'dark' was also used to negotiate cultural position. In both cases, 'dark' tacitly denoted gothic content, but positioned the works in an overtly masculine, American tradition that could be repurposed for an effort toward legitimacy. Fan histories that present the idea of a Dark Age as a significant period tend to focus on the gothic aesthetic content of the work, without naming it as gothic. Retaining this vocabulary, whilst acknowledging that it should be subsumed under the broad terminology of the gothic, preserves the acts of cultural, transatlantic, and transhistorical positioning that defined the period, and are essential to understanding it fully.

Finally, this study does not consider the works of the 'Dark Age' that followed Miller to be merely copies created for financial gain (for the most part). I will argue that instead, the major works of the Dark Age share political, theoretical and literary influences and inspirations that account for their similarity – the Dark Age is, in essence, a product of a particular moment of comics and Western history and should be considered as such. Although the major works were completed in serial publishing by 1996, the continuing visibility of Dark Age aesthetics and innovations in the American superhero narrative to this day suggests that conclusively dating the period may not be as simple as it first appears. The final question in determining a Dark Age is whether and, if so, when this age

concluded. This question, and the differences between my model and other analyses of the history of the superhero comic, will be discussed further in the final chapter of this thesis.

Methodology 2: Investigating the Dark Age

In order to understand the Dark Age in the context of an American prose culture, there are two key questions to be answered: what are the relationships between antebellum American fiction and late 1980s superhero comics, and why do these relationships exist? Fully answering the question of what relationships exist between the two moments requires a method of reading the texts that can discover and establish their narrative and structural similarities. The project is complicated by the fact that the short stories and novels of the antebellum United States are very different forms to the 1980s comics texts, so any viable approach needs to be suited to working across different media. Once the cross-media similarities are recognised, the reason for these must be sought in the broader cultural field. For this investigation, the text acts as a starting point to find shared politics and concerns that can explain the desire to return to an earlier historical period. The thesis then becomes concurrently an analysis of a narrative thread of influence and a cultural study which suggests that the two moments manifest their similar fears and concerns in similar literatures.

For the first question, many of the comparable features can be established by a literary analysis that considers these two moments as part of a larger tradition of gothic writing and cultural production. Gothic criticism is well-suited to examining a mode visible in different media. As both Goddu and Williams observe, the gothic does not lend itself well to definition but can be determined instead by the recognition of certain features or conventions within a text. Gothic is relational, and determined by looking backwards: knowledge of one text as gothic can easily be applied to another because the gothic mode continually recombines and reuses elements from preceding gothic texts (Botting 1996: 14-

17). Initially, the gothic borrowed its haunted mansions and decaying costumes from earlier historical moments; now, it borrows or modifies aesthetic features from earlier examples of gothic. As an example of this type of criticism, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* identifies a number of thematic features common to the gothic tradition, such as live burial, oppressive landscapes, and something unspeakable. Identifying these conventions as regular occurrences allows her to make the argument that 'once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind […] you can predict its contents' (1986: 9). The same is true for the Dark Age – seeking out and analysing its 'conventions' supports the argument for studying the texts together, as well as placing these texts as specific instances of the longer tradition of gothic writing. In this thesis, I will present a number of shared conventions of the Dark Age, including the collapsing mansion, the mirror, and the monstrous philanthropist. Once these conventions are established as common features uniting works of the moment, it is possible to find a common point of origin: the Dark Romances share similar conventions, suggesting a significant relationship of influence.

Because the gothic as a mode absorbs and reimagines its past in its aesthetic, it often separates signifiers of previous times from their specific point in time – it separates 'history' from 'the past'. This removal of temporality is essential to the gothic, allowing 'the past' to become an aesthetic rather than historical signifier. Unfortunately for my purposes, critique that focuses on the aesthetic and narrative signifiers of gothic has a tendency to replicate this feature. Whilst Sedgwick's work treats the Gothic as a historically situated period of literary production, she has little concern with the historical or temporal frame for the texts she analyses. In this thesis, whilst gothic criticism is essential for the work of textual analysis across media, the gothic mode cannot be treated solely from a synchronic view of recurrent symbols, motifs and aesthetics. The two moments, connected by shared aesthetics and conventions, are some 130 years apart. To begin to answer the question of *why* texts separated by such a gap can be linked by both

deliberate reference and shared conventions also requires a more historically focused line of criticism.

In what Roger Luckhurst has termed the 'spectral turn', gothic criticism was modified around the turn of the twenty-first century by the 'hauntology' of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (Luckhurst 2002: 527). In *Specters*, first published in 1993, Derrida asserted the importance of haunting, the spectral, and a return to the nineteenth century as a response to the changing world and the proclaimed 'end of history' of the post-Cold War era (2006: 10). By itself, this argument begins to make sense of the similarity between the 1980s and the 1850s. Just as Moore sets up the balance between 'Millennium' and 'Nostalgia' in *Watchmen*, the moment of millenarian crisis at the end of the twentieth century results in a return to a moment of national crisis in the nineteenth. Further to this argument, Jodey Castricano's *Cryptomimesis* (a key text of the spectral turn) brilliantly argues that *Specters of Marx* can itself resemble or be read as a gothic text drawing on a legacy of American Romance writing (Castricano 2001: 8-9). Poe and the end of the Cold War haunt Derrida just as they haunt the writers of the Dark Age. The outcome of the turn towards hauntology is that Derrida's foray into Marxism and political thought, from a previous standpoint of generally synchronic philosophical critique, creates a path for gothic criticism desiring historical specificity.

Derrida's book is both a useful addition to the analysis of gothic conventions, and a valuable example of thought contemporary to the writing of the Dark Age. In the act of reading *Specters of Marx* for its gothic qualities, the relationship between looking backwards and thinking about the future at the end of the Cold War is better unveiled. The gothic convention of the ghost, in *Specters,* is Derrida's response to Francis Fukuyama's threat/promise of the future as a utopian neoliberal end-state. Fukuyama is keen to show that all ideological options other than Enlightenment liberalism have been proven false and there remains no contest to liberal hegemony (Fukuyama 1989: 3). To counter this assertion, Derrida proposes that the ghost allows for the promise of a different future

through a return of something from the past. Haunting, Derrida writes, 'is historical […] but it is not *dated*' (2006: 3).

In other words, haunting operates like other gothic conventions: it carries the idea of a past, but is not wedded to a specific temporality. Free-floating and able to return after death, the ghost can assert itself anew even after apparently being eradicated by history. Fukuyama's argument for the approach of Enlightenment liberal hegemony is challenged by its own logic if the spectre of alternative ideas can return. In post-Enlightenment states, the ghost appears as a remnant of the fantastic, an object whose very existence presents a challenge to rationalist or materialist futures. In this context, the gothic itself looks to be a radical alternative. Seeing it this way makes sense of the Dark Age's resurrection of the ghosts of a nineteenth-century literature with a decidedly anti-utopian tone at the end of the Cold War. Bringing back the spectre of gothic writing was bound up with the desire to bring radical and critical politics into the superhero comic.

Although *Spectres of Marx* offers a useful place from which to begin, this thesis must also make use many other theoretical models. The wide variety of sources and themes in the Dark Age, the idiosyncratic reading habits of the writers, and a production process determined by market concerns and a large and varied audience, means a wide variety of sources and approaches to the texts are necessary. To this end, the methods and backgrounds for the research are broad, and incorporate thought from areas such as medical history, esoteric studies, and urban development to investigate and explain some similarities of theme and content. When incorporating these methods, this thesis will follow directly the work of Fredric Jameson by acknowledging the 'sectoral validity' of such approaches, and utilising them where necessary according to their consonance with 'a complex and mushrooming cultural superstructure' (Jameson 1989: 10). Rather than a set of individual approaches, or even a set of individual periods of history, the work of this thesis to connect two moments requires seeing them, and the vast amount of cultural production that comes between them, as articulations of a single process.

Forming part of what Jameson has called the 'intolerable' attempt to unify, the attempt to define an artistic moment prioritizes the individual moment above the progression of history or the individuality of its artists (Jameson 2002: 28). This unification suggests relationships across time that are not part of a progression, and does not acknowledge these moments as ideological constructs rather than 'elements of the superstructure' (1971: 326). In Jameson's terms, the historical dialectic is better expressed in the idea of 'leap-frogging': a dialectical relationship of phenomena in which two categories affect each other through reversal and interrelationship (1971: 311). This movement underlies a more insightful periodisation, and 'allows a given phenomenon to be perceived as a moment or single interlocking section in a single articulated process' (1971: 312).

For my purposes, the idea has a particular significance since the texts of the Dark Age all exhibit a concern with history and with historical periodisation. As they return to the Dark Romance, and position themselves as inheritors of a literary tradition, they inevitably construct a series of leap-frogging dialectical arguments. These can be found in their relationship to their precursors, to other texts of the Dark Age, and within the narratives as part of their conception of history and politics. Dictated in part by the content of the texts themselves, the work of explaining the similarities between the two moments lies in reading the reversals and responses of the Dark Age in terms of a series of historical and political shifts and interactions, played out in the superstructure of literary culture. As such, the variety of ideas on display in the Dark Age have similar origins in the antebellum United States, but also see a wide variation as this thought disperses across the shifts of history.

The validity of the political critique I have outlined is demonstrated by what it reveals about the texts themselves. I will argue, in the thesis, that the political orientations of the texts and writers of the Dark Age have similar roots in the politics of the Dark Romance, particularly as a response to American utopian socialism and critique of the

American state. However, the responses to this background are varied and surprising once these politics have been filtered through the twentieth-century political discourses and ideologies that permeate cultural production. Frank Miller's revolutionary politics, originating from his dystopian vision of American cities in the 1980s, begins to look akin to revolutionary Marxism. Alan Moore, on the other hand, demonstrates an anti-utopian anarchism coloured by anti-Marxist theory. In both cases, this result goes against the current understanding of the politics of the writer, and is only explicable by following a dialectical history that traces the reversals of thought that take place at the points that connect two moments as part of a larger tide.

The texts themselves have a politics found both in their uses of the gothic and in their engagement with the political and social world of the late twentieth century. A method of periodisation that can find similarities in content and offer a historical perspective on the reasons for this similarity, without removing these perspectives from the critical methodologies of diachronic history, can draw out this politics. At the same time, this thesis must account for the deliberate acts of re-writing that the texts contain, which indicate a different politics of re-enactment being engaged with by the writers. Their use of themes, conventions, narratives, and direct allusions to literature of a previous age falls within the 'populist phenomenon' of re-enactment described by Vanessa Agnew. Agnew suggests that re-enactment 'performs political and cultural work that is quite distinct from more conventional forms of historiography' (2004: 328). This argument essentially posits re-enactment as a critical action: the deliberate similarities and discrepancies between the re-enactor's text and the original text creates an implicit dialectic which comparison must work to resolve. Just like the act of leap-frogging, the reader of the re-enactment is asked to consider the ways not in which the texts are similar but how they differ, and use this analysis to perform the political and cultural work of understanding why and how differences between an original and its (chosen) re-enactment come to exist.

Agnew's argument is focused on the practices of historical research – experimental archaeology, popular recreations of historic journeys, and so forth. Despite this, her description of re-enactment as 'history from below' is equally applicable to the revival of themes by creators of popular entertainment rather than members of the academy. Just as re-enactment looks across a historical divide, in the division of high and low culture it can also give voice to what she describes as 'hitherto marginalized positions' (Agnew 2004: 327-28). As Michael Denning has argued, the middle ground between high art and mass culture like 'science fiction, detective stories or strip cartoons' attracts investments from those who have an uneasy relationship with legitimate culture, as they offer a 'refuge and revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital' (2004: 108). Denning's point builds on Bourdieu's assessment of the relationship between taste and class position, and the same ideas underlie this thesis, to some degree. Bourdieu begins *Distinction* by addressing the 'self-evident' relationship between social position and taste which is both denied and jealously guarded by those with the requisite varieties of capital (educational, economic, cultural) to determine 'legitimate culture' (2010: 3ff). The state of affairs where cultural legitimacy and economic-social position intersect to maintain class divisions is a lived reality for the writers of the Dark Age, and for comics artists more generally (Pizzino 2016: 5). These intersecting positions are reflected in the combination of literary appropriation with social commentary in their work.

As the rise, fall, and rise again of the horror comic demonstrated, the relationships between artistic legitimacy and financial gain were complex and could be negotiated in a variety of ways. Bourdieu suggests that 'cultural production distinguishes itself […] in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of that object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy' (1993: 164). The targeting of comics as a threat to children on such a large scale would not have been possible without the combination of a lack of artistic legitimacy and the nation-wide visibility that financial success had produced. By contrast, the resurgence of the horror comic in the 1970s and 80s relied on

the production of a cloak of artistic legitimacy, as the use of terms like 'sophisticated' in their marketing indicates.[1] In the Dark Age, the production of a more robust legitimacy was taken up by the writers themselves, seeking to re-enact and re-write an earlier moment that had gained cultural legitimacy in order to accord the same value to their work. Bourdieu ends the first chapter of *Distinction* with the comment that 'what is nowadays called the "counter-culture" may well be the product of the endeavour of new-style autodidacts' to produce another market 'with its own consecrating agencies' (2010: 89). Emerging in part from a comics counterculture which had performed exactly that effort, the creators of the Dark Age were able to combine their countercultural capital with a knowledge of legitimate culture often gained autodidactically. The synthesis gave them the tools to pursue the legitimisation of the superhero comic and produce financial success.

My argument, then, is that comics creators in the Dark Age were well aware of complex relationship between comics and high art, and their work should be read in light of their efforts to affect this dynamic. In making this argument, I am relying on and repeating two axioms that begin what is currently the most effective and extensive discussion of legitimacy in the comic book form – Christopher Pizzino's book *Arresting Development* (2016). Pizzino's work begins by rejecting the outright the claim that comics 'grew up' in the 1980s. Instead, he argues that questions of legitimacy continued to shape the production of comics, and that 'focusing on the problem of status greatly enriches our understanding of the graphic novel'. Whilst I proceed essentially these same principles, this work differs from Pizzino's in several areas. Not least, this work attempts to uncover from the text exactly what it was that constituted the legitimate high culture looked up to by the writers of the Dark Age. In this sense, this text begins from Pizzino's insight that comics creators

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1 Alongside DC, the other major contributor to the horror comics resurgence of the 1970s was Warren Publishing, responsible for titles inspired by the EC horror comics of the 1950s including *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Vampirella*. Warren's approach to avoiding censorship also invoked the terms of an adult-orientated legitimate culture: by marketing the titles as 'magazines', he was able to circumvent the code altogether (Cooke 1999).

'know quite well where their medium stands in culture and large and display this awareness frequently in their work' (2016: 3), and seeks to use the displays of awareness as tools for reading the text. Furthermore, this thesis incorporates a focus on an intellectual culture beyond comics as a key element in questions of status – a facet of the debate on legitimacy absent from Pizzino's account. The omission seems particularly odd in the case of his study of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, which gives less than one page to discussion of Bechdel's numerous literary references in the text, and barely mentions the role of feminist and queer theory, again made an explicit reference point in the text, in shaping the author's relationship with 'legitimate culture'. I would argue, and do in relation to Grant Morrison in this thesis, that the desire to frame a graphic narrative within a critical discourse is an attempt to validate it that should not be overlooked. Finally, I reject in this thesis Pizzino's claim that a focus on race and gender works to 'obscure' questions of cultural legitimacy in comics (2016: 11). Rather, as is demonstrated by the Dark Age's return to an earlier gothic moment, legitimacy is often accorded exactly by the ways in which marginalised positions are either abandoned or incorporated. In this sense, the ideas are intrinsically bound.

The Dark Age then can be seen as case of re-enactment in Agnew's terminology, a continuation of the ongoing struggle with legitimacy that has shaped all Anglo-American comics, and of cultural creators seeking to change the 'universe of possibles' for their art (Bourdieu 2010: 42). Recognising this, there is a responsibility for the work of comics scholarship to examine how historical detail (or, in my case, literary history) has been interpreted and appropriated and discover the marginalised positions or undercurrents of society which are thrown up by these interpretations. For the present study, this would mean examining the position of those with an uneasy relationship to legitimate culture and educational capital as a 'marginalised position' which is highlighted by their re-enactment in comics of legitimate culture. At the same time, it must not avoid the ways in which this re-enactment performs further acts of exclusion, as is the case when the use of 'dark' legitimises an object by removing the associations of the marginalised positions that

contributed to and were traded on by the gothic. The work of periodisation and comparison I propose in this thesis is justified by the promise of a genuinely critical incursion into the fields of comics and literary studies, discovering the voices that have been excluded from a literary culture, how they have written back to this exclusion, and who they left behind.

To sum up: the main theoretical work of this thesis will be on two fronts, the textual and the historical. Although these methods are not always seen as complementary, and the issue is complicated by working across a long temporal gap and in two different media, the study aims to unite issues of form, content and history through a combination of gothic literary theory and the historical traditions of cultural studies. In this way, the dark turn in comics of the 1980s will be presented as a reworking of content that emerged originally in the nineteenth-century Romance tale. Once this argument is established, fundamentally the same methods of textual scholarship can be used to evidence and analyse these similarities. In order to explain why this repetition or re-enactment takes place, I will suggest that comparisons between the politics and contexts of the two moments reveal shared concerns, but that in the works of the Dark Age these concerns are subject to a process of historical changes and reversals. Ultimately, I argue that the preoccupation with darkness and the supernatural as a recurring theme in both periods offered a path to legitimacy for a marginalised art-form and coincided with the United States' national and global moments of crisis. In the comparison between the comics of the 1980s and their precursors in the Dark Romance, the works of the Dark Age reveal a complex, radical and often revolutionary gothic politics.

Outline

The main body of the thesis takes the form of four in-depth studies of key works of the Dark Age. I begin with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, the earlier of the two superhero books of 1986. Reading Miller, I uncover a range of connections to Levin's core

group of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. These connections are made as Miller grapples with the status of the superhero comic and its relation to American literary and political traditions. Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, the second of the 1986 comics, overturns many of the connections made by Miller. Writing from the point-of-view of an outsider, Moore finds in Melville and Hawthorne a narrative that gives preference to personal and gnostic insight rather than utopian politics. Moore draws out the anti-Transcendentalism of the Dark Romance, and applies similar criticisms to the statecraft of the twentieth century.

In the third chapter, I consider Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*. Published in 1989, *Arkham Asylum* acts as a useful counterpoint to the works of 1986. It was commissioned directly in their wake, and shows their influence in the form of a deliberate writing back against their method of legitimising the superhero comic. In the text, Morrison looks to reverse the impact of Miller and Moore on the superhero story by exhausting their gothic content. Finally, I read Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* – the work that embodies the legacy of the Dark Age. *Sandman's* longer publication history covers several key historical moments. On a global scale, the collapse of the Soviet Union removed one of the basic assumptions on which the 1986 works built their apocalyptic narratives. In comics, the establishment of Vertigo and the transition from graphic novels to long-form series indicated the financial and critical successes of gothic comics. In *Sandman*, I find the legacy of the American gothic turned to new uses, questioning the exclusivity of the Dark Age and pushing towards an incorporation of some of the marginalised voices of both moments.

The concluding chapter begins with a summary of the arguments presented in this thesis. I go on to demonstrate the wider applicability of the critical methodology I have developed. In line with Jameson's requirement that a successful theory be predictive, I apply the theory to relatively minor works of the Dark Age. Finding that the theory remains applicable, I argue for the incorporation of these texts into the paradigm. Finally, I re-read some current descriptions of the period 1986-1996 in comics in light of the arguments of

the thesis. Doing so, I argue that the gothic and radical political content of the works deserves to be at the centre of our understanding of a productive moment, where superhero comics and the traditions of American gothic literature meet.

'Another orphan': *The Dark Knight Returns*

Introduction: Loomings

For Geoff Klock, the contemporary superhero narrative is 'a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore' (2002: 4). His argument demonstrates a disconcerting trend that emerges in studies that mention the comics of the mid-1980s: whatever it is that constitutes the important changes to comics in the 1980s, Frank Miller's Batman comics are the example. Miller's central place in the narrative is regularly reinforced despite a wide variety of critical opinions on what exactly his comics changed. Some studies focus on the 'grim and gritty' comics which were the hallmark of the Big Two publishers during that period, others consider the break in long-term metacontinuity and the retelling of the history of superhero characters, or some argue for the change in sales and publishing which focused on collected editions and bookshop sales to an adult market. For new studies of the period, the situation presents an unusual problem. To understand the Dark Age, you must start with Miller but are then free to pursue the issue in almost any direction. The solution, I propose in this chapter, is to return to Miller's texts themselves. Miller's references to Poe, an overlooked element of studies to date, suggest an immanent literary and political content that makes sense of the desire to situate Miller as the initiator of a new tradition in the superhero comic.

There is immediately apparent potential in posing an American literary tradition as the interpretative lens for Miller's writing. Firstly, seeing a literary tradition as part of Miller's source material resolves an issue for theories that focus solely on the comics tradition: they often struggle, or make roundabout theoretical manoeuvres, to account for the incorporation of gothic and noir aesthetics into superhero comics. Secondly, this

reading can include the economic-cultural analysis noted above by demonstrating a movement toward the superhero comic *as* literature. The refiguring of content and form in the Dark Age helped comics gain a comparable market position to the precursor texts from which Miller works. Rethinking Miller as an author engaging with the canon of American literature appears to unite some of the key measures by which the Dark Age is determined. Consequently, Miller's interactions with the history of American literature, which at the point of his writing was a discourse from which comics were largely excluded, will be taken as the focal point for understanding the content and importance of his major work about Batman – *The Dark Knight Returns*. This approach offers a fuller understanding of Miller's role in advancing the superhero comic, showing how he is able to break free from the long shadow of 'legitimate' writing and the stigma of the genre at the beginning of the Dark Age.

In the type of roundabout theoretical account that uses comics history to explain the aesthetics of the Dark Age, Klock suggests that the genre-defining darkness and 'anxiety' of Miller can be explained though Harold Bloom's theory of anxiety towards precursors in the same form (2002: 12-14). His argument is that 'the building density of tradition', which takes place as the superhero comic develops decades of fictional continuity, 'becomes anxiety' in the 1980s and collapses inward (2002: 3). In this analysis, the revising of Batman's fictional history in the 1980s is expressed in an anxious, gothic, 'grim and gritty' mode which is the period's most obvious and defining aesthetic technique. Similarly, and in a more successful example, Paul Young's recent assessment of Miller's *Daredevil* asserts that it was the 'staging-ground' for *The Dark Knight Returns* and the '"adult" trend in the mideighties', paying particular attention to the violence and reflexive 'postmodernist irreverence' of Miller's writing (2016: 209, 212). Young links this effort to the 'healthy tradition of playing games with the fourth wall begun by newspaper strips at the beginning of the twentieth century' (2016: 212). However, whilst Young is careful to acknowledge the importance of Chandler in Miller's writing, with such a long view on this history of

cartooning there is perhaps room to acknowledge that Miller's postmodernism also has a literary antecedent. After all, where is the reflexivity of postmodernism without a canon against which to establish oneself? Miller's canon, I want to argue, is not merely (although it certainly is constituted in large part by) the history of cartooning – over which Eisner looms – but also a literary canon invoked by his references to Poe.

As the many qualifications in these passages indicate, I do not intend to criticise either of these accounts: there is significant value in considering Miller's or Moore's relationship to comics history, and Young's work in particular does justice to the task. However, these approaches should be balanced with a criticism attuned to the broader cultural field. As Young is aware, the aesthetics of *Dark Knight* have precursors in other media, and recognising the cues Miller provides to these precursors simplifies the effort of explaining the background to his work. More profoundly, adjusting Klock's useful observations with a longer and larger perspective transforms these anxieties into a more striking tension between the new work and the field of legitimate culture. The tensions are between high and low, between the contemporary and the historical, between the institution and the outlaw.

Immediately, a series of oppositions that are implicit in Miller's narratives are brought forth as critical tools. Christopher Pizzino has effectively argued that for Miller, the cultural tensions embedded in writing comics are constituted in fiction as the struggles of Batman (2016: 79). Pizzino's account suggests that critics have misrepresented Miller's writing as an attempt at 'literary seriousness'. Those that do so, he argues, separate it from its comics history and therefore miss seeing the primary feature of the text as a concern with the status of comics. However, in his concern to avoid the elevation of *Dark Knight* to 'literary' seriousness that he rightly critiques in previous scholars, Pizzino avoids discussing the ways in which Miller clearly constitutes his struggle for legitimacy in relation to a literary culture. Pizzino takes the pioneering work of Bart Beaty in *Comics versus Art* as the groundwork for much of his analysis of *Dark Knight* and pop art (Pizzino

2016: 102-3). Beaty's work does not consider in detail the role of a body of literature in determining the debates around legitimacy in comics – an inevitable feature of his valuable effort to provide a counterpoint to the dominant role of literary scholarship in comics studies (2012: 44). However, the deliberate absence in Beaty becomes more apparently an issue when it is carried over into Pizzino's work. Without dismissing either Pizzino or Beaty, I want to suggest that Miller's references to nineteenth-century Romance make a case for a literary culture as a determining factor in Miller's engagement with legitimacy, and go some way to explain why critics have seen the work as an attempt at literary seriousness.

Therefore, my argument in this chapter attempts to fill in a missing piece for Pizzino just as it does for Klock, and in fact connects the two. Where Klock seeks an explanation for the gothic tones of *Dark Knight* in a pre-existing comics culture, Pizzino suggests that this culture's illegitimacy determines the narrative and political content of the text. Rather than see these as separate problems, I want to suggest that they are connected by Miller's return to a previously legitimated, gothic form. David M. Ball has drawn-out the modernist tendencies in contemporary American graphic novels, arguing that they share with modernism a concern with the relationship between literary and popular culture and a 'rhetoric of literary failure' (2010: 106). There is a similar effort in Miller's work, which attempts to authorise itself by appealing to an earlier form where the gothic mode overcame the literary/popular divide. Surrounded by the towering edifices of the American literary heritage, which cast long shadows across any writer who attempts to walk among them, Miller must confront and subdue the literary giants which both inform and condemn superhero comics and bring them to work for his purpose. Not only does this turn towards Poe and Hawthorne directly explain the gothic atmosphere of Miller's text, it also highlights the gothic politics of *Dark Knight*'s narrative content. In one example, the feeling of being haunted by history and in conflict with a society that seeks to master or ascribe a particular status upon comics is transcribed as the continual constitution of

Batman as orphan – a gothic convention pregnant with similar undertones of disrupted childhood development. In this sense, Miller's attempt to address the illegitimate status of comics becomes transfigured from a metaphorically gothic problem into a palpable gothic aesthetic.

Alongside this gothic aesthetic, Pizzino argues that Miller incorporates 'massive and complex' contradictions into his narrative that act as an affront to the types of analysis that assert comics illegitimacy (2016: 88). Again, this valuable point rewards more detailed analysis. In creating these contradictions, Miller is not simply denying the value of analysis, but creating a critically valuable dialectic. Miller's text struggles with, and eventually attempts to synthesise, the structures of popular culture and literature which have developed in oppositional and hierarchical positions. In the attempt, Miller reveals that it is a particular, dominant, discourse rather than any intrinsic value which keeps the literary and the popular apart. These positions can only be reunited, and the dialectic resolved, by attempting to divorce them from a historical context which suggests they should be separate. In text, these historical contradictions are played out as a political content – a war between two sides and a hero attempting to upset a dominant power. Therefore, the aesthetics and subtexts of Miller's Batman are fundamentally both gothic and dialectical, dramatizing the issue of resistance to hegemonic narratives in fiction, culture and history in order to resolve divisions and push the superhero comic forward. The combination of gothic atmospheres and struggles with institutional power created Miller's original and boundary-pushing anxiety, expressed in the metaphor of the simultaneously gothic and revolutionary orphan superhero.

Conceptualised in this way, the major concern of Miller's work begins to be unveiled: it is history itself, and how to exist within, or separate oneself from, history, that forms the core of his work. Miller's texts negotiate the tensions between history as foundation-stone, providing a base for the continuing growth of a culture, and history as prison-wall, a structure used to delineate and restrict development in service of a

hegemony. This negotiation is most evident in his desire to retell Batman's origin, pointing to the ways in which an enforced, singular interpretation of history must be broken with in order for to creative change to occur. Miller must simultaneously draw from the built tradition of American writing yet present a resistance to the culture that separates his work from its historical origins. The motif of the orphan becomes a succinct expression of this problem. Miller returns to Wayne's orphaning as the core of the Batman mythology, continuously rewriting it in order to shape his new vision of the Batman. In the text, it comes to represent a method of articulating the unsettled qualities of a break from a history, and finds a place at every structural level of the work. Miller, Batman and America must exist as orphans in order to remake and overturn the dominant course of history.

The metaphor of the orphan, although useful, also introduces a reflexivity that complicates this theory. The best model for Miller is exactly that from which he must break away – the foundation-stones of American literature in the nineteenth century. Hawthorne, Melville and Poe shared a project to build a 'properly American literature', emerging 'unparented' from the background of European literature (Coviello 2005: 92). This project is exactly the achievement Miller must replicate, but for him it is these three authors that loom most oppressively over his work. As a response, the legacy of the nineteenth century is foregrounded by Miller in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. The text ends with two allusions to short stories by Poe, 'The Purloined Letter' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher', which will be discussed in detail in this chapter. Although this response may seem counterproductive, it replicates Melville's method of achieving the same goals. *Moby Dick* 'boldly announces its indebtedness to narratives' from its opening 'Extracts' onwards, yet Melville's purpose is to rewrite, rework and mock this history in order to build a new literature set apart from it (Coviello 2005: 93). By referencing its precursor texts, *Moby Dick* 'conveys the grand assurance […] of severance from the past' and forges a new path which unites an American heritage with a European tradition whilst surpassing both (Coviello 2005: 105). Correspondingly, Miller's allusions do not simply suggest an

engagement with the history of the detective story and the Romance, but unite two cultures (this time, high and low rather than American and European) whilst suggesting that the new form is strengthened by abandoning their strictures. The allusions articulate to the reader that Miller's concern is exactly the same as the 'myth-making' work of the beginnings of American fiction, rendered in a new form and time-period.

The political content of Miller's texts, often considered problematic, is equally informed by his nineteenth-century background. Miller uses literature to criticise the historical, political and moral structures of the American community as he sees it during the point of his writing. I argue that he does so by selectively updating the social conservatism of Hawthorne, and the antagonism toward both hegemonic state power and criminal activity suggested by the Dark Romantic writers. This interpretation of Batman differs significantly from the prevailing critical view of Batman, which sees his actions as reinforcing a political conservatism more in line with twentieth-century American Republicanism. This position is exemplified by Matthew Wolf-Meyer, who argues from the earlier work of Pearson and Uricchio that 'Batman's primary purpose is one of maintaining hegemonic stability and the position of the upper class, of which Bruce Wayne is a part' (2006: 193). Starting from this position, Wolf-Meyer makes a complex, and engaging, argument to explain Batman's turn to revolutionary utopian imaginings in *Dark Knight* that centres around his 'appropriation of Robin's classless state' (199). Again, without devaluing Wolf-Meyer's point, I would suggest there is a simpler explanation to be found by tracing the politics of Miller's text back to a moment when American Republicanism was still revolutionary and utopian – unveiling a nuance to Miller's political outlook that has passed by many critics, both for and against his controversial positions.

By taking Batman's purpose back to the nineteenth-century imagining of an American hero, Miller again faces the complication that this tradition of resistance is the foundation for the state he must work against. Attempting to separate from (and, in some way, rehabilitate) a tradition by re-using it, Miller faces a struggle which is translated into

his narrative of an aging Bruce Wayne fighting against the state and its history in order to save it. Miller emphasises in his work a revisiting of Batman's past and future, reiterating that Wayne, like Ishmael, is 'another orphan' (Melville 1988: 573). The orphan carries the promise of a new literature and a synthesis point for the dialectic argument. Miller's project, the success of which requires him to imagine his place within the pantheon he rebels against, is to make a literary orphan, haunted but broken free of his parents, of the already gothic, orphan superhero: the Batman.

The Terror of Tradition: Miller's Gothic Geography

Miller's texts are structured as a dialectical argument, at the heart of which is the opposition between the individual and the state. Whilst at first glance the priority Miller gives to this debate might indicate a simple libertarianism to his politics, closer reading complicates the picture. The debate takes various forms in *Dark Knight*, with 'the state' encompassing a wide range of superstructures, from the directly coercive and corrupt police force to citizen-action groups. In a notable sequence early in the text, Miller juxtaposes the scene of a defence lawyer arguing for the rights of his client with Batman's later interrogation of the suspect once he has been released. The cynical invocation of the requirements of due process for a career criminal is countered by Batman's threat that: 'You've got rights […] [but] right now you're bleeding to death. Right now I'm the only one in the world that can get you to a hospital in time' (Miller 2002: 43-45). The two scenes are interspersed with Miller's ever-present television broadcasts. Over the three pages, these give airtime to criminal gangs and feature vox populi interviews where citizens threaten homosexuals or malign Batman's vigilante approach. The end result is the depiction of a multi-faceted state, where the law, an institutionally corrupt police force, the media, healthcare, and citizen's opinion align to maintain the status quo by working for their own benefit. The visible manifestations of a particular superstructure, such as the

lawyer or the middle-class advocate of rehabilitation for criminals, come to represent the ideologies and history which produce and justify the state as it currently exists. The only alternative, Miller presents, is the individual who can cut through or act outside this nexus.

The dominance of the state through both ideology and coercion presented by Miller suggests he sees the state as hegemonic, in the Gramscian sense of an active network of power. For Gramsci, the 'political and cultural hegemony' of the ruling classes of the state has both positive and negative functions. The courts, the police and others institutions educate through coercion; the school carries the positive function. The two are supplemented by 'a multitude of other so-called private initiatives' (Gramsci 1971: 258). The ultimate end of this hegemony between state and private interests is to produce a population in correspondence with the interests of the ruling class. Gramsci suggests those that do not 'correspond' are subject to further 'negative education'. Similarly, in *Dark Knight*, Miller presents medical treatment of mental health as a tool of the state, simultaneously failing to help the Joker and seeking to suppress the revolutionary potential of the Batman. A Gramscian reading of Miller demonstrates an essential nuance to his libertarian individualism. Considering Miller as particularly Gramscian, rather than any other variety of Marxist critique of state ideology (Althusser, for example), emphasises Miller's active revolutionary intent in *Dark Knight*, as well as the importance of the revolutionary leader as an enforced or imprisoned outsider.

Furthermore, the revolutionary content of Miller is intrinsically connected with the gothic convention of the orphan. Like the orphan, it is only a movement that destroys its parentage, separates itself from the course of history, that can create anew. Gramsci's argument that 'only the social group that poses the end of the state and its own end as the target to be achieved can create an ethical state' (Gramsci 1971: 259), is paralleled by Miller's conception of Batman as the hero 'out to make himself unnecessary' in his desire 'to make the world a better place' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 'Afterword(s)'). The confluence between Miller and Gramsci initially appears surprising, given the critical

narrative that has tended to emphasise Miller's engagement with American right-wing politics. However, it highlights that at the heart of Miller's work from the 1980s is a content that engages less with party-political ideas of left or right and more with the desire to undermine a flawed system of government and create an alternative state. Although the politics of subversion and the social conservatism of both Miller and the trio of Dark Romanticists is complex and will be a recurring theme of this thesis, here it is clear that the act of building a new state involves a dismantling of previously dominant structures and histories. This shared project makes a three-way confluence, on this point at least, of Gramsci, Miller and the Dark Romantic trio of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe.[2]

In particular, Miller examines the tensions between individual and state using motifs and techniques previously employed by Melville and Poe. In his 'Extracts', Melville engages with the metanarrative of literature at the level of his fiction, utilising an existing literary discourse and removing it from its context in order to reconfigure it as a threat to the existing order. The lineage is both evoked and disrupted, demonstrating a breakage which offers the potential for the new. Miller follows Melville's pattern by recreating the familiar in non-familiar contexts, but this time taking the American nineteenth century as his source material. Concepts and conventions like the gothic city, the flâneur, and the decline of the aristocracy are incorporated to evoke and disrupt the history of literature to the point of his writing. Making these incorporations, Miller differs from Melville and Poe by inserting the conventions drawn from previous authors into a narrative with an explicitly revolutionary content. Miller re-contextualises the nineteenth-century Romance's

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[2] Today, Miller's complicated variety of conservatism/libertarianism has become a thornier issue for critics than it was in the 1980s. Miller's post-9/11 work, especially the graphic novel *Holy Terror*, is misogynist and Islamophobic (Darius 2011). Miller's developing right-wing outlook has led to attempts to identify where the seeds can be seen in Miller's early, influential, work (Croci 2016). For my purposes, I have chosen to focus on the shared revolutionary politics of *Dark Knight Returns* in the context of the Dark Age. However, a reading that aligns his 1980s work with theorists such as Gramsci certainly does not prevent, and perhaps lays the groundwork for, seeing late Miller as part of the trend of American nationalist and populist politics that presents itself as a revolutionary movement.

subversive power of rupture by matching it with the violence of his text. The lineages Miller seeks to disrupt, those which he uses as models, are literally fought against and blown up by his textual representative: Batman, the American individualist.

Miller's foreboding, gothic cities point to the legacy of nineteenth-century culture that bears down on his work. Before working on Batman, Miller's *Daredevil* presented Hell's Kitchen as a world of street toughs and gangsters – part of his tactic to reimagine the title in the vein of film noir and hard-boiled crime fiction (Young 2016: 69). His Gotham combines this approach with recognisably gothic geography, from mud-filled sewers and lawless street-level crime to towering neo-gothic skyscrapers replete with grotesques. Depicted by Miller, Janson and Varley (*Dark Knight*) and Mazzucchelli and Lewis (*Year One*) with strong blue, black and grey palettes and emphatic chiaroscuro, Gotham connects mid-twentieth-century noir with the longer history of gothic art and architecture. Moreover, by making the connection, Miller recreates anxieties that are present in nineteenth-century depictions of the city. On both sides of the Atlantic, mid-nineteenth-century writers drew on gothic and Romantic conventions to imagine new industrial and urban spaces as degraded ruins that harked back to the crumbling aristocratic mansions of the European Gothic. Whilst the clearest examples are to be found in writers like William Harrison Ainsworth and G.W.Reynolds, this trend 'also influence[d] the Gothic elements of more literary works' such as Dickens. As Botting notes, in these texts:

> Tyranny and horror are both nightmarish and real in its gloomy
> descriptions of aristocratic corruption and depravity, which, in the city's
> labyrinth of immorality, also enmeshes the behaviour of the working
> classes. The apparent reality of the city's horrors evokes emotions that
> ask questions of the social order. (Botting 1996: 80-82).

Encompassing the grotesques and mansions of the aristocratic and capitalist upper-classes, as well as the violence of life in poverty, Miller's Gotham is very similar. As a textual city,

then, it reminds the reader of the accumulation of gothic and noir conventions that determine its existence. The city, in other words, is itself representative of the task Miller takes on. The gothic architecture and geography of Miller's Gotham expresses a pervading sense of history and anxiety that dominates everyday life.

To write a gothic Batman story, Miller's first challenge is the history that appears to stand over and determine his every move. His first step in meeting this challenge is to contest linear time itself. Whilst history looms down from Gotham's buildings, its culture is drawn from Miller's contemporary New York and its fashion, commerce and technology offer 1980s visions of the near future. When it is considered that this society is, in fact, the future for Batman, who has aged significantly in *Dark Knight*, Miller's city becomes a place where time has collapsed. The collapse of time in Miller's Gotham evokes Derrida's free-floating spectre that marks the end of history: a signifier without a real historical place, haunted by an ever-present past.

At the same time, there is a concrete model for the aesthetic and historical background of the Dark Age superhero in the Romantic conflation of scientific development and gothic themes. The city is both haunted and, in Marjean Purinton's term, 'techno-gothic', a compound that describes 'Romantic drama's [...] structure in which disturbing issues and forbidden experiences characteristic of gothic are recontextualized by the period's pursuit of science' (2015). In Gotham, past, present, and future coexist simultaneously. An architectural past and an imagined future combine to create a haunting and haunted 'techno-gothic' present – a reimagining of a contemporary American city that can acknowledge its history and make it new. For Miller, it is as though alienating Batman from the restrictions of historical periodisation, whilst using aesthetics to evoke specificities of cultural and literary history, offers the potential for change the narrative requires.

The gothic has a critically-established role as a mode of expression for anxieties about time and change. Byron and Punter suggest that 'it looks increasingly probable that

the gothic has […] something quite specific to do with the turns of centuries' (1999: 2). I would argue that the evidence of the American Romance as a gothic mode suggests the correlation is not specific to a moment where the clock ticks over. Rather, gothic content corresponds to moments of tension between modernisation and history – looking simultaneously backwards and forwards. This tension is perhaps felt more keenly at the turns of centuries, supporting Byron and Punter's argument, but exists in all periods when technological or social development produces or is collocated with a sense of shifting political or historical tides. The gothic city is the best example of the conflict of modernisation – it is simultaneously the symbol of architectural and technological progress and the hotbed of human corruption and vice. In *Dark Knight,* the Art Deco buildings, typically a sign of technical innovation and modernity, become terrifying. The combination of the grandiose and the dark lends itself to a gothic presentation which the American Romantics, decadent and fin-de-siècle European writers like Baudelaire or James Thomson (B.V.), and the Dark Age can adopt. By presenting the city as gothic, it is unsettled, and made dangerous by this unsettling: turning progress back upon itself as threat rather than promise.

As is the case with architecture in gothic narratives, anxieties about time and history are often transformed into anxious space by the gothic. Byron and Punter note that because it propounds instability and flux, gothic writing challenges spatial geography and map-making (1999: 4). The convention of the malleable environment, one in flux, exists throughout the history of gothic, from *The Castle of Otranto* to *House of Leaves,* and *Dark Knight* is no different. Miller appropriates conventions of gothic environments to present Gotham as dangerous, changeable and lacking structure. Making the city dangerous, the translation of historical anxiety into a spatial environment undergoes a second translation, becoming a moral and political statement. The origins of this move are in a Romantic and nineteenth-century engagement with (and, often, opposition to) new urban environments. Scott Bukatman has suggested a direct line of descent from Victorian detective fiction and

American pulp novels can be seen in Gotham's 'grotesque, gothic, claustrophobic environment'. Defined by its underworld, and its 'concatenation of hidden spaces, corners, and traps', Gotham is 'knitted together' by criminal infestation (2003: 203). Its physical geography, in other words, replicates its human conditions. In much the same way, critics have suggested, Melville's New York turns geographical into spiritual danger on 'a horizontal axis which rarely leaves street level in which the movement, such as it is, is into a dark and inner nothingness where the spirit is literally paralysed' (Clarke 1988: 38).

White and White suggest all three Dark Romantic writers are characterised by their use of degraded European cities to critique American urbanisation (1982: 335). Miller repeats the convention by substituting the imagined Paris of the American writers for his imaginary Gotham. In both *Dark Knight* and *Year One* Bruce Wayne is shown walking through the city at street level, a contrast to his methods of travel as Batman, whilst an inner monologue reveals the state of the city as the primary motivation for his non-state-sanctioned battle against crime. Metaphorizing his inner-self as a variety of gothic monsters, Wayne makes it clear that Gotham is dangerous to the soul as well as the body (Miller 2002: 12). The politics of Miller's text are clearly in evidence. The degraded, gothic, city oppresses the individual forced to exist within its structures. The accretion of history and the corrupt, hegemonic power in the city eventually reduces its inhabitants to 'human rubble' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 10).

Bukatman suggests that there is 'more than a little Holmes and Dupin' in Batman's street-level analysis of the city, drawing on the history of urban surveillance in the construction of the detective story (2003: 203). However, for Miller's version of the character, the detective is tempered with the drifter and Melville's Ishmael offers the best example of an original model. In his monologue at the beginning of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael suggests sea-faring as an alternative to the violence of 'methodically knocking people's hats off' that the city induces (1988: 3-4). In *Year One* Bruce offers a comparable picture as he walks the city, noting its landmarks, although Miller adapts the focus to evidence each

of Gotham's spaces as filled with crime, rather than men in 'ocean reveries' (Melville 1988: 10). Just like Ishmael, Bruce is at this point a 'drifter' in his disguise, also searching for a way to hold back his desire to knock people's hats (or heads, in Miller's version) off. Bruce does not pause before coffin warehouses, or bring up the rear of funerals, like the interminably gothic Ishmael (Melville 1988: 3). However, he does willingly subject himself to Miller's own representations of a flawed and failing humanity – he pauses in front of child prostitutes and drug dealers (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 10). Just as Ishmael's 'substitute for pistol and ball' is to go to sea, Wayne's is to become the Bat.[3]

Miller's recurring depictions of Wayne walking across the city and commenting on it appears to draw on the well-worn tradition of the flâneur that found its way into various forms of popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Wayne's backstory as a man of considerable inherited wealth and leisure time, allowing for his other life as Batman whilst maintaining his cover as a millionaire playboy, suggests the makings of an ideal flâneur. Although this background is evident in Miller's depictions of Wayne, he modifies the convention for his own purposes. Bruce is either 'retired' (2002: 12) or a 'drifter' when he perambulates, effectively denying or rewriting the official status of Bruce Wayne as society dilettante. It is a recurring feature that Miller's writing revises the established Batman story by only engaging with it at points where he can remake, or exist outside of, the long-term continuity. Here, he does the same for the flâneur – engaging with a literary tradition only when it can be challenged. Given that Wayne's walking and observing leads him to see a city in peril and respond with violence, it is more appropriate to view Miller's Wayne under Alexandra Warwick's definition of the 'negative flâneur'. For Warwick, the experience of walking and observing the decaying city, gothic in its relationship with history and modernity, produces a being in paranoid relation to his environment. Any positive

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[3] Wayne's dislike of guns is clarified in *Dark Knight* when Batman makes a declaration against them as 'the weapon of the enemy' to the Sons of Batman (Miller 2002: 173). The adoption of the Batman mask is evidently part of a choice to avoid 'pistol and ball'.

individualism (and ability to critically comment on observations) found in the flâneur becomes alienation or isolation (1999: 82). Wayne, a lone zombie walking among the damned, embodies this negative conception (Miller 2002: 12).

The idea that Miller is following conventions that originate in the nineteenth-century short story is validated by theoretical approaches to the medium. Frank O'Connor famously wrote that 'in the short story there is the sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo – Christ, Socrates, Moses' (2004:18). Douglas Tallack builds on this suggestion by proposing that in the American short story, what O'Connor called the 'lonely voice' gave rise to the 'characteristic opposition in American cultural history between the individual and the anonymous, modern society', especially where this society was depicted as a city (1993: 152-4). Grant Morrison's later suggestion that superheroes are echoes of symbolic figures (2012: 15, 30), then implicitly posits the superhero comic as the inheritor of the American short story. Miller, an adept writer of the opposition between individual and modern society, falls in line with an American cultural tradition in his vision of Bruce as flâneur. The places Bruce is shown walking, as a negative flâneur, produce an individual isolated by their surroundings. The individual then requires a method to overcome the sense of violent resistance engendered by the space they inhabit. Where Ishmael and Melville seek escape at sea (a self-orphaning through removal), Miller and Wayne resolve to turn their need for resistance against the environment which creates this need. In order to do this, they must first separate themselves from the hegemonic vision of history and culture which they intend to fight – they must orphan themselves from their environment.

The act of orphaning or deliberately cutting-off the individual from their environment presents a problem for the Batman mythology: if Batman is to be Gotham's saviour, he must destroy his connection to it. Whilst an act this radical might be a step too far even for the revisionist Miller, fortunately the Batman mythology comes with ready-made proxy piece of gothic architecture. Gotham's looming towers are essential to Miller's

presentation of an oppressive history, but a similar effect occurs in the malleable space of Wayne Manor itself. Like the city, the manor evokes a gothic geography with its above-ground gothic architectural façade and immense subterranean caves.[4] Also like the city, the manor's architecture evokes a ruling-class history Batman must reject. The manor's closest fictional-historical analogue is Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables. Wayne Manor was 'built as a fortress, generations past, to protect a fading line of royalty from an age of equals' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 4). Similarly, Pyncheon sought to have 'his race and future generations fixed on a stable basis, and with a stately roof to shelter them for centuries to come' (Hawthorne 1983: 365). The irony of the failure of this purpose is as central to Miller's version of the Batman story as it is to Hawthorne. At the end of Hawthorne's novel, the old mansion is abandoned in a favour of a new life in the West; at the end of *Dark Knight,* completing the process of orphaning, the mansion is destroyed. Where the city could not simply be burned down to begin anew, the mansion comes to represent an old order that cannot be preserved. Warwick's analysis that the gothic city shows that 'the attempt to establish ruling lines and enduring architectural settings is futile, and can only end in destruction' is equally applicable to the architecture of the gothic mansion (1999: 85).

Whilst Wayne Manor is built in a way that parallels Hawthorne's tale, its destruction mirrors Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', which ends with a collapsing mansion that evokes the symbolic weight of the collapse of the old orders, and the gothic horror of lineage. The House of the Seven Gables, The House of Usher, and Wayne Manor are comparable as instances of the familiar gothic convention of the haunted mansion. Within each house, the dead have the potential to return to life to haunt the living and in each tale, the gothic atmosphere lends a sense of fatality to the narrative. In Poe, Madaleine

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[4] It is worth noting that the malleability of gothic space creates a narrative freedom for managing this aspect of the Batman mythology, especially with regard to the location of Wayne Manor in relation to Gotham and the size of the Batcave underneath the manor.

Usher rises from the dead and the house caves in; in Hawthorne, inhabitants are haunted by a familial curse and must escape the house for a new life; marked by murder, Bruce Wayne's personal history torments him until he recognises the need to destroy both the aristocratic emblem of his forbears and the hidden history of the Batman. Collapse and ruin attend the inheritors of history until this self-destruction takes the form of self-orphaning, of deliberately destroying one's inheritance in order to start afresh. In the haunted mansion, families, titles, inheritances and buildings themselves fall inward under their own weight of history.

Poe's description of the fall of the House of Usher bears particular comparison to Miller in this context. The comparison highlights that Miller is engaged with the same ideas as Poe, as the similarity of the passages suggests, but also that Miller sees Batman as his own narrative proxy. Miller, in effect, performs the same task as Batman. Re-telling Poe's scene in his own words and images is a core part of his work to burn down his history and offer a place for comics to rebuild. 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 in Miller's description of the collapse of the ancestral home that are present in Poe's earlier scene. Delineated by separation across caption and panel breaks, Miller offers a personifying simile, an emphasis on speed and sudden light, and colours the scene with an intense red, all of which Poe has used to the same effect. Although Poe's personifying metaphor is filtered through a secondary simile ('shouting […] like the voice of […] waters') it opens the path to creating the house *as* history, containing within it the anguish of generations of fading royalty released by collapse. By the time of Miller's writing, the simile is just as effective in its reduced form. The haunted house animated by the history within it has been created as convention for the reader familiar with the traditions of American or gothic literature. Miller's 'ruby-red' flash recalls Poe's 'blood-red' moon, as well as the focus on the red of Superman and America in the text. Furthermore, the red 'flash, bright as the sun' harks back to earlier in *Dark Knight*, where the missile burst blocks out the sun and plunges Gotham into darkness and devastation (168), but is also comparable to Poe's phrase: 'entire orb of the satellite burst'. The organisation of this scene demonstrates a specific goal for Miller's text. The dense imagery, and intra- and inter-textual allusion, enact features of legitimated prose literature during the scene of the destruction of the text's most obvious literary convention. Like the House of Usher, Wayne Manor collapses as the spectre of what haunts it returns from the dead.

In his Batman stories, Frank Miller is attempting to break with history and recycle the past as potential: he works to turn the historical into the futuristic. This process is evoked in the complex chronology, geography and aesthetics of *Dark Knight*. The gothic concern with history and geography informs the mythology of Batman, and offers Miller a

point from which to demonstrate and disrupt his connection to literary tradition. In the convention of the flâneur in the city, the negative effect of the environment on the individual evokes the weight of history that shapes Miller's writing. In the convention of the haunted mansion, the collapse of the mansion signals an effort to disrupt that connection without abandoning it entirely. The power which Miller gains from having his manor or city allude to Hawthorne or Poe is the demonstration that in writing, there is a density of allusion and tradition which the individual must navigate, but which has become overbearing. Tradition is like the gothic city, 'a city of alleys […] an anti-city in which metropolis has become necropolis' (Clarke 1988: 38).

Detective and Dissenter

For the reader attempting to navigate Miller's 'city of alleys', looking simultaneously forward and backward through the depth of intertexuality and allusion, there is one clear-cut path between the nineteenth-century Romance and the modern superhero. In his work on Miller's *Daredevil,* Paul Young identifies origins for Miller's characters in archetypes drawn from hard-boiled private detective fiction (2016: 59). There should be little surprise that Miller's superhero fiction shows traces of this prose culture – titles like *Hard Boiled* and *Sin City* are deliberate exercises to recreate it in comics. In this section, I will examine the genesis of Miller's Batman, from his interest in the hard-boiled private detective to a nineteenth-century discourse on the development of a state police force for the urban environment. The private investigator embodies a combination of subversion and conservative individualism that Miller imports to his version of Batman, yet he situates these characteristics within their longer history, beginning in the nineteenth-century Romantic vision of the flâneur and detective.

For his interpretation of Batman, Miller repeatedly looks to the roots of the urban hero in the paranoid, violent, anti-state crime fighter of the inter- and post-war period.[5] This shapes the ageing Batman to fit within a long tradition of heroic dissent and individualism. As a counter, Superman is moulded as the antagonist in *Dark Knight* – Miller is highly critical of the complicity or co-operation with the state suggested by Superman's role as enforcer of an American political hegemony. Connecting Batman to the detective is a rediscovery of something present in the origins of the superhero but lost in the four-colour comics of 1960s. Working for the good of the citizens, yet motivated by profit, and working against a corrupt and pervasive state police force, the private detective represents a third path between state and criminality, a law unto himself. In other words, the private detective enacts the same dialectic of individual and state prevalent throughout Miller's writing. Like Batman, the private detective only steps in when the state is failing, just as the superhero only exists when the police cannot deal effectively with threats to public disorder. I want to suggest, though, that while the argument is dialectic, the outcome is gothic. The effect of the dialectical tension between state and individual is primarily psychological, and produces the inner demons present in several variations on the heroic dissenter. Whilst the characterisation of the dissenter as troubled, melancholic or taciturn is most often seen as a convention of the hardboiled detective, its origins can be traced to the influence of the mid-nineteenth century Romance.

The importance of a third option within a two-sided dialectic is paramount to understanding this historical narrative. The typical story of crime and policing has only two combatants, the police and the criminals. The narrative of two warring sides became a common approach to depictions of criminality in the city during the nineteenth-century. Jacob Riis, in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), goes so far as to refer to himself as a 'war

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[5] Here I mean the height of the 'hard-boiled' detective, which can be taken as roughly 1929 – 1951 (the serialisation of Dashiell Hammet's *Red Harvest* to the closure of *Black Mask* magazine).

correspondent' during his description of a police raid on slum tenement housing (2010: 46). In part, Riis's text is a commentary on the two-sided narrative, attempting to act as a counter to the media that would rather recount the narrative than address the root cause by exposing intrinsic economic and social causes for criminality. As a journalist himself, Riis is both participating in and determining the discourse of contemporary journalism in his work. In the wider sphere, however, Riis was only one of many in a burgeoning culture industry where the dominant approach was to fuel public outrage at the battle for control of the streets.

The narrative is reflected in both Poe's and Hawthorne's work. 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' contains newspaper reports claiming 'we have received several forcibly written communications, apparently from various sources, and which go far to render it a matter of certainty that the unfortunate Marie Rogêt has become a victim of one of the numerous bands of blackguards' (Poe 1984: 536). Gangs, apparently, roam the streets in defiance of the police whilst the newspapers fuel public dismay at the matter. *The House of the Seven Gables*, told in large part through reminiscence and report, reminds us that 'it was remembered how loudly Colonel Pyncheon had joined in the general cry, to purge the land from witchcraft' (Hawthorne 1983: 357). Hawthorne's commentary on the actions of the persecutor of witchcraft implicitly criticises the vigilantism perpetrated by the enforcers of order in his contemporary world – a recurrent technique in his work. The language of Hawthorne's Puritan enforcer gangs reoccurs in *Dark Knight*: the Mutants cry 'to raze Gotham -- to purge Gotham' preserves a nineteenth-century narrative in Miller's presentation of Gotham as a city divided by a corrupt police and criminal gangs (2002: 171). Later, the Mutants will become vigilante enforcers, the Sons of Batman. The easy transition – switching from one side to the other in the 'war' – upholds a critique of a power dynamic that oppresses from both sides.

The problem posed by the presentation of two warring sides, a presentation that the hegemonic state often seeks to uphold in order to reinforce its authority, is where the

ordinary citizen falls in this divide. If they do not align with the criminals, nor with the police (either as supporters or as vigilantes) they are abandoned. Miller returns to the plight of the ordinary citizen throughout *Dark Knight*, introducing the option of his third, or orphan, path. Unlike Riis, Miller is not concerned with social reform through state-sanctioned means, but through violent alternatives which originate in the power of the 'ordinary' citizen. In *Dark Knight*, gang violence is presented as part of the city itself. Batman then looks to be the only viable alternative for the inhabitant who regularly sees both gangs and their supposed protectors (the police) as dangerous or incompetent.

The recurrent failures (and often outright corruption) of the police in Gotham – a longstanding feature of the Batman story – forces the citizen to turn to Batman as protector. These failures point to the inherent flaws in the narrative that began in the nineteenth-century. Studies in the history of policing tend to reinforce that the idea of the police as 'crime-fighter' is flawed. The police cannot realistically prevent most crime and they are 'judged by a goal they cannot attain' when they are considered to be a preventative force against criminality (Wilson 1982: 446). In fact, their origins lie (at least in the United States) in maintaining 'order' or social structure for the functioning of the newly industrialising urban society (Lane 1982: 134-35). In the 1980s post-industrial city, the mismatch between the two concepts for what the police should do – prevent crimes and maintain order – has resulted in a situation where an 'order' is maintained by police tolerating or colluding in crime. Gotham, Jim Gordon suggests, might 'fool you into thinking it's civilized' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 2). Attempts to challenge this hegemony invariably bring the citizen into conflict with the police, as Bruce discovers in his first attempt (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 11ff). The 'war' between criminals and the police has become an amorphous structure of power, and existing outside of this is its own act of resistance. Parallels between Miller's Batman and earlier narratives of conflict and detection arise from the ways they share in investigating the flawed logic of urban policing.

In the nineteenth-century, both Poe and Melville wrote short stories that indicate a growing concern with the role of the police in urban societies. Batman has an ancestor in Bartleby, whose passive resistance becomes a matter 'sent to the police' before he is 'removed to the Tombs as a vagrant' (Melville 1987: 42). Neither for nor against the police, but disrupting the social order simply by refusing to participate in his society, Bartleby has the position of criminal forced upon him. For Poe's detective Dupin, the outcome is more positive. Acting outside of the law (and in direct conflict with the government minister who plays the antagonist in 'The Purloined Letter'), Dupin becomes the person to which the police turn when they have failed. Throughout the character's history, Batman has walked the Bartleby/Dupin boundary – alternately criminal and resource for the police. When Commissioner Gordon characterises Batman as 'the living spirit of … something we need' (Miller 2002:116), this 'something' is the third position initially brought forth in the characters of the detective Dupin and the urban dissenter Bartleby: a figurehead, or a resource, forged from non-compliance.

In print culture, the changing status of the detective reflects the changing nature of urban policing. The trend that began in the nineteenth century for real and fictional stories of detection made a convention of the detective-hero. By the twentieth century, this was reflected in the interest in stories of the 'superstar' salaried police detective doing battle with his opposite number, the celebrity criminal. The public narrative of these two entities had a role in shaping the idea of police as 'crime-fighter' (Wilson 1982: 449-50). However, the conflation of the two roles of the police as crime-fighters and enforcers of order also plays a part in changing the history of the fictional detective. In the Prohibition era, the exemplar heroic agents of the law – Eliot Ness and 'the Untouchables' – were federal agents targeting a superstar criminal *and* institutional enforcers of social order, raiding speakeasies frequented by ordinary citizens. Whilst newspapers and true crime reporting tended to focus on state-employed agents, anxieties over the criminalisation of the citizenry are reflected in the growing popularity of stories of private detectives. The hard-boiled

heroes of Hammet and Chandler take an alternative 'third' position to the police-criminal binary by resolutely avoiding order enforcement (and often disrupting it) whilst acting in the direct interests (and employ) of the citizenry.

Not only does the detective necessarily stand outside of a binary coding, but this is fundamental to the success of his method. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe takes a job that cannot be handled by the police, and solves it by remaining outside of this structure. His persistence in investigating two seemingly unconnected deaths is his advantage. Organised crime, the police and the media are too involved in their own ideas, and with each other, to try to connect the dots. Marlowe's logic can be traced back to Dupin's insistence on independence and rationality – his dismissal of the accepted narrative allows him to solve the 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Purloined Letter'. Batman provides a third path for the citizens of Gotham in both *Dark Knight* and *Year One* which has developed from Poe's logical problem-solver through Hammet and Chandler's hard-boiled private eye. All three character types sharing the same tendency to see formal authority as corrupting, the relationship between police and organised crime as problematic, and the relationship between the police and political leadership similarly so.

Properly, it is not a third position but a non-position which the private detective exploits to go about his work. Marlowe is not a cop, yet he is 'honest'.[6] Neither cop nor criminal, he is hard to place, able to move undetected and assume identities which are projected onto him (Chandler 2005: 57-58, 61). Batman is able to exploit the same effects in his own persona. The failure to understand who or what Batman is allows him to appear in a variety of guises. In a frequent example, Batman is compared to the irrational, gothic conventions of the vampire or monster, and then makes use of that fear to deter criminals

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[6] The difference between this non-position and one within the system is evidenced by a counterpart to the private detective that all three periods incorporate: the 'clean' cop, who is clean only insofar as he is not linked to crime, and who is willing to disobey the political role of the police as order-keepers in his collusion with the private detective.

that are not afraid of the police. Miller's creation of this effect is drawn directly from Hammet, who stated in his first introduction to *The Maltese Falcon* that 'Spade has no original. He is a dream man' (1999: 965). Having no original, Spade's character and allegiances are difficult to understand for other characters in their worlds, and he trades on this indeterminate status in his self-presentation. Spade makes a 'growling animal noise in his throat' when threatened (Hammet 1999: 422), a metaphor repeated by the 'wild animal growls' of Batman (Miller 2002: 34). Without a single definite interpretation, this type of hero is open to what Will Brooker describes for Batman as 'anarchy': where all readings of the character within the fictional world are valid (2002: 21). For Brooker, this means Batman exists within Gotham as multitudinous – he is the vampire, the hero, the man. The origin of this fluid identity can be seen in the position of the private detective, where the idea of the superhero as an outsider to the state begins to take shape.

His non-position between criminal and police-force leaves Batman constantly in debate between his commitment to 'justice' as an absolute and his need to exist outside 'law' as a state-imposed systematisation of justice. Where Superman becomes a regulated and state-sanctioned hero, Batman becomes resigned to his need to exist outside the law despite this meaning that he will inevitably exist in opposition to it. In Miller's hands, Batman's doctrine becomes: 'We've always been criminals. We have to be criminals' (2002: 135). The conflict between law and justice described by these words places Batman in a literary tradition that speaks to America's founding mythology. Most clearly, this conflict is continuously re-enacted by Hawthorne, whose writing contains a common thread of early American characters who must decide to follow a moral and social code either outside or in direct opposition to that of the America they inhabit. In every case, this makes the character physically an outsider to their community, and enacts the divisions between keeping order and preventing crime.

Hawthorne's fiction is often about the struggle to reconcile the social and legal structures of the United States with the people who live there. When Hester Prynne walks

in the footsteps of the 'sainted' Ann Hutchinson in *The Scarlet Letter*, the celebration of,

and trials for, the dissenter becomes part of America's foundational values (Hawthorne

1983: 159). 'Sainted' is an epithet not conventionally applied to exiled dissenters, but in

Hawthorne's fiction those who stand against the law, and are condemned for doing so, are

the substance of his criticism of an unjust and oppressive legal system. Hester,

metaphorically and literally, walks in Hutchinson's footsteps when she chooses to stay in

New England and work individually for the good of the community 'of her own free will'

after being made an outlaw (Hawthorne 1983: 344). Batman's suggestion that 'we have to

be criminals' in order to improve society, connects Miller's outlaw politics from Batman,

through Hawthorne, to Ann Hutchinson. In this line of thought, the United States is

founded in Antinomianism, and it is in the criminalised dissenter that American society

finds its heroes.

Although the examples of comparable features between Miller and Hawthorne on

this point are numerous, Hollingsworth from *The Blithedale Romance*, and Holgrave from

The House of the Seven Gables merit particular attention. Hollingsworth is made an

outsider by his philanthropist project to reform criminals, attempting to forge a third path

between crime and the punishment of crime. Holgrave is made an outsider for his pursuit of

technology and avoidance of social interaction, perhaps seeking the 'Black Art' (1983:

424). Both of these are emblematic of the ways in which Batman becomes the outsider in

Gotham, where the only acceptable paths are gang crime or institutional crime (the police).

Miller's celebration of individual, rather than state-authorised moral codes, is most

obviously foreshadowed in *The House of the Seven Gables*, where the idea recurs

throughout Hawthorne's novel:

> But if Mr. Holgrave is a lawless person!" remonstrated Phoebe, a part of
> whose essence it was to keep within the limits of law.

"Oh!" said Hepzibah carelessly—for, formal as she was, still, in her life's
experience, she had gnashed her teeth against human law—
"I suppose he has a law of his own!" (Hawthorne 1983: 425)

She was startled, however, and sometimes repelled—not by any doubt of
his integrity to whatever law he acknowledged, but by a sense that his
law differed from her own. (Hawthorne 1983: 504)

Hawthorne's words are recreated in Miller's text, which gives Batman and the
individual citizens of the state the power to remake or determine something previously
controlled by the state: 'Tonight, we are the law. Tonight, I am the law' (2002: 173). The
statement echoes Hepzibah's remonstrance to Phoebe that to have a personal code is not the
absence of a code, but also evokes Judge Dredd's catchphrase 'I am the law': a satirical
conflation of personal moral codes and state laws in Mega City One's dystopia. Whilst
Dredd's words imply an enforcement (the law itself exists exterior to the judges, and the
phrase should be read as 'I am the totality of the representatives of the law'), Holgrave's
and Batman's ethics display a more Romantic, and more truly American bent. Here the
primacy is given to the individual in opposition to the state-construct. To have a law of
one's own is to believe in the power of the individual to determine justice as an absolute,
and create a code that supersedes that of the state.

Miller's use of similar declarative constructions in other works suggests a long-term
development of his thought on the relationship between the individual and an institutional
legal system. Batman's words should be contrasted to the words Miller gave Daredevil,
earlier in his career, which were precisely the opposite. After saving the killer Bullseye and
turning him over to the police rather than allowing him to die, Daredevil explains to a
police officer that 'I'm not the law' (Miller 2001: 50). The dramatic irony, of course, is that
Matt Murdock's day job actually is as a lawyer. Daredevil is the counter to Batman: he
believes in the sanctity of the legal process and only becomes a hero when corruption

causes the state to fail in its duties. Again, the state is at fault in Miller's story. Daredevil's choice to defer to the institution is questioned by the watching police officers – precisely the men assigned to uphold the law. For Miller, the representatives of the state are to be trusted with neither law nor justice. This distrust becomes a vital feature of Miller's writing on *Daredevil*, and the hero increasingly takes justice into his own hands as he encounters failings in both the police as law enforcers and the courts in administering justice through the law. The metamorphosis that begins in Daredevil is completed in Batman, whom Miller makes the only arbiter of justice. America's heroes, from Holgrave and Hester Prynne, through Marlowe, Spade and Batman, are the ones that follow their own law in spite of the state, rather than align themselves with it.

The choice of a 'law of one's own' comes at a price, however. To be a Romantic American hero is to work for the good of the people, whilst believing or accepting that the state works against these interests. The desire to be outcast, working for the people and given meaning and purpose from non-position, is in direct contrast with the need to physically live inside or in proximity to the society one wishes to dissent against. The outcome of this division is that the hero is inevitably drawn into direct conflict with the state they wish to save. Lassiter in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage,* the emblematic Western anti-hero, succinctly characterises the problem. Grey's character is a hero to the oppressed, but can only carry out his vendetta against the Mormon church by working in its environs. At the same time, he refuses to participate in Mormon society. The result is that he lives a tough life on the margins of a society he despises. Similarly, Gene Phillips suggests that 'Marlowe's constant adversary is California', exactly the place he lives (2003: xxiii). The taciturn independence of the Western hero, or the addiction and violence of the hard-boiled detective, originates in a life at the edges. Marginalised by a society they seek to save, these characters are drawn into conflict with that society and become haunted by the monsters of their own psyche.

Existence outside of the conflict between state and criminality defines Miller's characters. From this, it also comes to define his politics. Brooker comments that the 'freedom' of individuals to construct meaning for Batman 'should not necessarily be seen as having any power in itself to transform society' (2001: 28). Within the fictional world of Gotham, Miller's stories present the opposite view. Brooker proposes understanding Batman as an object constructed by a multitude rather than ordained by a state, and acting for the good of the public. Miller's narrative turns this figuration of Batman into a vision for the society Batman seeks: a whole constructed by a multitude of individuals rather than a corrupted dominant state. In *Dark Knight*, the emphasis on the power of the individual, in conflict with the state, becomes the expression of a political ideal and the force for change in hegemonic Gotham. Batman seeks a peculiarly American vision of the state where both corruptive state power and criminality are reduced or eliminated through citizen's actions: the power of a multiplicity of individuals is, in Brooker's reading, his own power. Batman, like the state, is what each person makes of it rather than what they are told it is.

The potential for revolutionary change inherent in the model of a state composed of individuals points toward a right-libertarianism that chimes with the long-term development of Miller's politics. This point is understated in cultural commentary that often emphasises the 'fascism' inherent in Miller's work (for example, Walter 2016). This 'fascism' is perhaps better understood in light of the American understanding of the Romantic individual. Miller is fundamentally against regulation, stating that 'anybody who thinks Batman was fascist should study their politics. The Dark Knight, if anything, would be a libertarian. The fascists tell people how to live. Batman just tells criminals to stop' (Kit 2016). As the quotation indicates, at the heart of Miller's politics is a disconnect between his willingness to promote some individual action in line with the prevailing state (telling criminals to stop) and his disdain for more overt policing of 'how to live'. For Miller, it seems, the hero must always be situating him/herself at the site of conflict, but remain resolutely individual and hidden from view, even when building a new state. Miller's

treading of a line between state and not-state is drawn from an American model of the hero that can be traced back to ideals in Dark Romantic fiction. This context explains both the valorisation of dissent by the author and the potential negative consequences for the individual dissenter. The anarchy of readings that stems from Batman's place outside state-controlled narratives becomes a subversive or radical right-leaning libertarianism that aligns Miller with his nineteenth-century forebears.

Descriptions of Miller as 'fascist' then miss the American origins of his politics, which is better described as an exaggeration of a latent or potential totalitarian impulse in the ideals of the Romantic individual. Wayne's choice to dress like a Bat is an act of self-fashioning that creates the 'anarchy' of readings Brooker describes. His choice to do so is provoked by a question he asked earlier in his life: 'what do I use to make them afraid?' (2005: 20). The fear of the unknown monster is central to the tactical impact of Batman, and he intentionally permits and encourages the interpretations accorded him by observers when he wears the costume (Miller 2002: 34). Underlying these acts is the desire to improve his society: as Gordon suggests, achieving the goal is 'enough motive I suppose, to make a man dress like Dracula' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 65). In essence, by drawing on the position of the dissenter he is given, Wayne is able to weaponize the public fear of the gothic monster as a tool to achieve his goal of societal change.

The pattern of turning the fear of the outsider into a program for change is exactly that of the tradition of Hester Prynne's American Antinomianism, but with one striking difference that contains all the contradictions of Miller's libertarian politics. The desire for an emancipatory program found through self-presentation overlooks a recurring feature of earlier gothic writing, which focuses more often on those who have no choice in being feared as outsiders. Wayne's freedom in how to present himself is not a benefit given to Hester, who is forced to dedicate her life to altering the meaning of the symbol that defines her before she can begin to improve the lives of other women in her community. Miller's text appropriates the emancipatory power of the symbol of the outsider whilst ignoring the

great lengths required to overthrow a hegemonic interpretation of a symbol before an 'anarchy' of readings can take place. As is often the case with the Dark Age, re-enacting literary traditions in comics recovers some power for some people, but it also re-enacts the greater structural inequalities on which those traditions rest.

The Psychology of Reflection

Throughout the development of the American hero, the outsider is marked both internally and externally by the incompatibility between their need to be within and in conflict with their society. On the outside, Hester Prynne's badge, the black clothing of Lassiter or the adoption of costume and symbol by the superhero all denote characters who are outside society's laws, but not wholly banished or absent. On the inside, and underlying this physical denotation of difference, is a psyche put at stake by the division. Lassiter's black clothing is a simple motif to represent his rejection of his society; Hester's badge is an external marker of a private transgression, enforced upon her. Hawthorne's novel explores the psychological ramifications of this mark on not only Hester but also on Dimmesdale, whose mental anguish at his transgression and at Hester's suffering is so great that it becomes a permanent feature written on his body. Building on this tradition, Batman's psyche is represented by Miller as a conflict between Wayne and the animal presence of the 'Bat', which struggles to break free when Bruce's 'mind is weak' (2002: 19). It is significant that Miller translates the internal struggles of a tortured psyche into a metaphor that matches the two forms of appearance Wayne adopts. As with Lassiter or Dimmesdale, the external appearance and the internal psyche take parallel forms. The need to mark himself as different, through the costuming and adoption of the animal symbol, is concomitant with his mental health, suggesting that his environment is responsible for his divided self.

The metaphor of the bat describes an internal monster, representing psychic trauma, that is brought to life when Wayne undertakes to address the problems of the state he is forced to live simultaneously inside and outside. Hawthorne's writing presents several comparable models, since the balance between state and individual, interior and exterior, also gives rise to the 'black soul' at the heart of Hawthorne's characters. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hollingsworth's 'philanthropic theory' is described by Coverdale as a 'cold, spectral monster which he had himself conjured up, and on which he was wasting all the warmth of his heart' (Hawthorne 1983: 679). Acting outside the state, but with the good of the people at heart, the monster that becomes Hollingsworth is created by observers who ascribe meaning onto those in positions at the edges of society. Coverdale notes: 'the aspect of a monster, which, after all—though we can point to every feature of his deformity in the real personage—may be said to have been created mainly by ourselves' (Hawthorne 1983: 692). Hollingsworth's pursuit of reform has produced an internal monster, and acting on this has made him monstrous to the sight of others.

The transformation of external appearance into internal monster is effected similarly in *Dark Knight*, where both Wayne and Gordon understand that the Bat-monster is within, and a part, of Wayne. Wayne refers to his divided psyche at this point as 'the creature' (Miller 2002: 25), recalling Hollingsworth's 'monster'. For Hawthorne, the transformation of the philanthropist into the monster is a predictable outcome:

> This is always true of those men who have surrendered themselves to an
> overruling purpose. It does not so much impel them from without, nor
> even operate as a motive power within, but grows incorporate with all
> that they think and feel, and finally converts them into little else save that
> one principle (Hawthorne 1983: 693).

For Hawthorne, the interior monster is representative of the internal turmoil created by commitment to an ideal opposed by those around you – the society or state. The exterior of

the monster, as perceived by the society not committed to the idea, reflects that the pursuit of this ideal becomes a threat to that society. Wayne, in becoming the monster, is fulfilling the promise of transformation, created by a desire to transform the state through philanthropy, that Hawthorne had set out well over a century earlier.

As part of the representation of an internal and external self, the idea of reflection is a recurring convention in the metaphorical schemas of both dark ages. As in Coverdale's analysis, the monster 'is created mainly by ourselves': it is a reflection of something in the observer rather than inherent in the object perceived. Coverdale's use of 'ourselves' is worth noting, as it emphasises that the metaphor of reflection is complicated by its reflexivity. Most commonly, we look in mirrors to observe ourselves, making the observer and the monster one and the same. Hawthorne makes use of this form of the reflection metaphor in 'Rappaccini's Daughter'. In the text, Giovanni understands the dangers of his interior self only when it externalised as an observable image. He stands 'motionless before the mirror, staring at his own reflection there as at the likeness of something frightful', when he realises that he has become poisonous (Hawthorne 1982: 1000).[7] In a variation on this theme, Miller has Batman undergo the same recognition process without a mirror at all. When confronted with Harvey Dent, Batman's response is 'I see… a reflection' (2002: 55). Dent – Two-Face – has had surgery to remove the obvious physical disfigurement which acted as a permanent external representation of his divided psyche. Now he resembles Wayne/Batman by having the option of an exterior which conceals a divided interior. Wayne must face the uncomfortable truth that he is not as dissimilar to his enemies as he would like to think. Caught in the act of looking, both Giovanni and Wayne gain self-recognition through reflection. Like a costume, the act of reflection makes an external image of an internal truth. Both costume and mirror become deliberate metaphors for

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[7] There is, additionally, more than a little shade of the supervillain in the character of Giovanni. Given superpowers through scientific study, and with a tragic backstory, his tale would not be out of place in the Batman mythos.

Miller's politics: only when the hero is placed outside the state can he reveal himself as threat.

Miller's development of the metaphor of reflection seems to build on Hawthorne's Romantic mode and add density to an existing tradition. The comparison between the two moments can be extended by noting that both use reflection to discuss a politics of the individual against the state. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, reflection offers a personal insight into character, but also demonstrates that what reflects upon the individual is a product of their state-environment. Maule's Well, more frequently a symbol of the sins of the past in the story, becomes a portent when Clifford looks into it. Gazing into the water, he 'would suddenly cry out, "The dark face gazes at me!" and be miserable the whole day afterwards'. The reflections Clifford sees in the well are an insight into his interior self (gained by looking into an interior space) and into the external forces that determine this self: he 'created shapes of loveliness that were symbolic of his native character, and now and then a stern and dreadful shape that typified his fate' (Hawthorne 1983: 484-85). 'Fate' is the cause of the dark face, the depressive part of Clifford's divided self, but the novel reveals that Clifford's 'fate' is not capricious fortune. In fact, 'fate' is a series of injustices, including imprisonment, he has faced as a victim of a vindictive yet impersonal law and state. Clifford's 'dark face' is directly comparable to the Bat which gazes at Bruce Wayne. Both cast depression upon the viewer, and indicate a period of being unjustly denoted as criminal. Where Clifford has been framed outright, Batman in *Dark Knight* has been made the enemy through public perception – he has been 'framed' by the media. The end result is the same: an internalised dreadful figure reappears as external image during a moment of reflection, symbolically representing the effect on the psyche of oppression or rejection by the state.

Hawthorne develops the metaphor of reflection as a critique of society by multiplying the number of images reflected: 'The sick in mind, and, perhaps, in body, are rendered more darkly and hopelessly so by the manifold reflection of their disease,

mirrored back from all quarters in the deportment of those about them' (1983: 474-75). A simple reading of this quotation is that in any society, the individual is made worse-off by the reactions of others to their sickness. The state is, unwittingly, a contributor to the illness of the individual. Within the context of a novel where the role of the state in causing Clifford's ill-health is not accidental, an even more damning and provocative meaning is found. Here, the sickness originates in the state which oppresses the individual; it is then embodied as an external appearance by the oppressed or the dissenter; the image is then amplified by the continual reflection of the status of outsider, of monster, in the 'deportment' of others. The dissenter is placed in a reverberation chamber of their own status, creating an inescapable atmosphere of monstrosity. The situation is comparable to the first depiction of Wayne in Gotham, where the text describes an internal monster and a gothic external appearance, whilst the image shows Bruce's feelings mirrored by the citizens around him (Miller 2002: 12).

The inescapable atmosphere of an accretion of monstrous reflections recurs throughout the Dark Age. Most obviously, the metaphor is represented in the convention of the Hall of Mirrors scene – a feature of several key Dark Age comics. In Miller's version, the Hall of Mirrors is the stage for Batman and Joker's final conflict. In the scene's artwork, it becomes nearly impossible to differentiate between reflection and reality, and the reflections are multiplied to the point of visual cacophony (Miller 2002: 146). Miller, in text and art, is re-staging Hawthorne's mirroring from all quarters to ask the question: who is the original? Earlier in the text, Wayne saw Two-Face as his reflection. By this point, there is nothing *but* the reflections of Batman and his opponent, and the 'sick in mind' literally have their reflections mirrored back from all quarters. Hawthorne, again, appears to have anticipated the narrative schema of Miller's text. The unusual confluence between the two can be explained by reading the Romance as the generative locus for the tradition on which Miller draws.

If, as in the Hall of Mirrors, it is impossible to tell which images are reflections and which are originals, it is equally impossible to suggest that the state is simply reflecting the sickness of those it has exiled. It is equally, if not more, possible that the original sickness lies within the state, and is reflected by its inhabitants. Working through this theme, Miller includes the psychiatrist Dr Bartholemew Wolper in *Dark Knight* as a straw-man representative of the state's claim over the origins of reflections. In Wolper's argument, the 'sick in mind', as both Two-Face and Joker are presented whilst undergoing treatment in Arkham, are unable to be cured because they are 'doppelganger[s]' of Batman, who he describes as a 'social disease' (2002: 66). Batman's seeing himself in Dent, in this reading, serves to enforce the criticisms with which Wolper charges him: criminals only exist because Batman exists, criminals are reflections of Batman.

Wolper, however, is little more than a deliberate figure of ridicule. As has been noted, he is a 'hostile exaggeration' of Fredric Wertham, the psychiatrist most famous for his anti-comics crusade of the 1950s (Pizzino 2016: 91). In Pizzino's view, confluences between Batman's actions and state discourses of mental health occur because these discourses determine, rather than predict, his actions. Batman makes the state's stereotypes a vivid reality, performing their inescapable stigma (2016: 92-3). In other words, the original is created by the state, and Batman reflects this. Unsurprisingly, given the conflicts between comics writers and mental health practitioners, Miller is sceptical of medical practice in mental health, preferring to posit corrupt hegemonic power as the cause and incubator of criminality. Wolper's argument for mental health treatment is made to look ridiculous in the face of the state's tolerance for crime, and reinforces Miller's desire to paint the sick state as the original source of the multiple reflections. In Miller's view, the sick state oppresses the citizenry by surrounding them with crime: the solution, of course, is to cure society with an injection of true American dissent in the form of a radical Batman.

Whilst my argument shares some features with Christopher Pizzino's, reading Miller's use of reflection against Hawthorne's in this way offers an interpretation that runs

counter to some other current understandings of Miller's work. Terrence Wandtke argues that *Dark Knight* is Freudian, while Miller's later (and critically reviled and satirised) *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* is Lacanian. Across the texts, the goal that 'the patient be brought back in line with the social order' is overcome by 'the analysand's realisation that s/he will never be justified by the perceived real world' (2012: 90). In contrast to Wandtke, the reading I have proposed here makes the realisation that 's/he will never be justified' essential to Miller's project in *Dark Knight Returns*. Rather than work towards rehabilitation, in *Dark Knight Returns* the 'perceived real world' is flawed, and Miller is critical of any desire to cure the individual or bring them back in line with a flawed social order.

   Dark Knight's Lacanian tendencies are made even more apparent when reflection and the tradition of the Romance is considered. Batman, Giovanni and the childlike Clifford all have what amounts to a literal post-'mirror stage' moment as adults: each encounter reflections that represent a tension between a self-image and the self which is formed by 'cultural intervention' (Lacan 2002: 7). Particularly in the case of Clifford and Batman, the 'paranoiac alienation' that results from a difficult transition between 'specular *I*' and 'social *I*' is emphasised in the point of coming to self-awareness through reflection. For Batman, the process of coming to be in the world is altered at a critical moment by his orphaning at a young age, changing his understanding of self and of the world around him. His self-image as 'orphan' is then rectified by his continual adoption of other orphans (the Robins, of which Miller's Carrie Kelly is the first non-orphan), just as his self-image as a child wronged is rectified by a desire to make Gotham better. Batman's 'Ideal-I', which he sees in the mirror as the bat, is both gothic monster and positive force that drives him to return to improving society: Wayne is constantly in conflict between the id's desire for revenge and the transition to the (social) pressure to live up the ideal-I which makes Gotham better. In this case, *Dark Knight* is fundamentally Lacanian, and my reading brings Miller further in line with Hawthorne's Hollingsworth by exposing 'the aggressiveness that

underlies the activities of the philanthropist' (Lacan 2002: 9). Whilst psychoanalytic readings are hardly fashionable in contemporary literary criticism, this approach again demonstrates the similarity between Miller and nineteenth-century American writing. Moreover, it demonstrates the way in which exposing this similarity has the potential to change how the text is understood.

Acts of Resistance

So far, I have argued that Miller's Batman texts play out a dialectic between the individual and the state. On one side is Miller's Romantic hero and on the other are the forces of the hegemonic state that make the hero an outsider – oppressive architecture, a corrupt police force, and a flawed medical discourse. Whilst the institutions or bodies on the side opposing the Batman appear separate, the similarity in their operation reveals them to be outgrowths of the same underlying structure, in Miller's eyes. These superstructures take the form of both formal institutions of the state and a citizen-body that enforces the morality, organisation and outlook of the state without being its ordained representatives.[8] The formal institutions and proxy citizen-action groups are related by a worldview that defines only two categories – for the state and against it. This worldview demonises all those not working for the state as criminals, making the work of those who fall outside this definition to resist and reform the state.

Miller's politics, as I have described them, have a direct effect on the narrative content of his writing. His stories become those of the state using all means at its disposal to maintain a perceived social order threatened by the outlaw hero. In both *Dark Knight* and *Year One*, the balance of power shifts between two poles, and the narrative replicates

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[8] Within the text, these citizen groups are complex web of political and pressure-group leaders, organised criminals, media representatives and armed enforcers. Evidence outside the text suggests Miller was particularly concerned by censorship bodies and the history of comic books. In a phone-in on *The Larry King Show*, he put forward a position that psychiatrists and special interest groups are 'independent' arms of the state enforcing a top-down censorship or morality out of step with reality (King 1989).

Fredric Jameson's leapfrogging motion of the dialectic, where advances on one side of the dialectic provoke a countermovement to surpass this movement by the other side (Jameson 1971: 311). In *Year One*, when Wayne develops techniques to confront one portion of the state (the unofficially sanctioned red light district), another portion is mobilised to deal with the threat. When this portion (the corrupt police force) is threatened, new tactics are enforced. In *Dark Knight*, this leapfrogging dialectic becomes an escalation of techniques and tactics that culminates in the state's deployment of Superman as the president's personal enforcer, fighting against Batman's highly advanced weaponry. Even after the battle is won by the state, Wayne's subsequent retreat underground advances the dialectic further as he plans to build a new stronghold from which to mount an attack. I will argue in this section that the very existence of this dialectic, and the reversals and reconfigurations that it enforces, is a reformation or new expression of a series of acts of resistance against the state drawn from nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century politics.

Geoff Klock writes that 'comic books have always had a political dimension, usually supporting whatever hegemonic discourse (most often conservative) the decade at hand had to offer' (2002: 39-40). In *Dark Knight,* however, the political situation is reversed. Klock supports his argument by noting that superheroes exist as reactionaries against the 'large-scale social changes' attempted by supervillains. In Miller's case, this tradition seems to paint Batman as the villain of the piece when he attempts social change and is confronted by Superman and Reagan for trying. Patently, this is not the case – there is no mistaking Miller's valorisation of Batman in the text. Instead, Miller is revising the typical pattern of the superhero narrative. To make Batman a heroic force against hegemony, he transfers the role of villain onto the state itself by placing the showdown between Batman and Superman as the climactic final battle. Since the fight with Joker takes place partway through the narrative, Miller appears to be positioning Superman as the true supervillain. Making sense of this choice requires seeing Superman as a proxy for the all-encompassing Reagan-state – not difficult, given that Miller depicts him taking orders

directly from the president (Miller 2002: 84). Written at a time when global and national geo-politics was undergoing a major change dictated by an ageing president, in *Dark Knight*, the large-scale changes desired by the traditional supervillain have become the already-enacted large-scale changes that come from the state. In other words, the state is no longer under threat but in a stage of post-supervillain hegemony. Batman, in line with the tradition of the American Romantic, is the dissenter hero.

Miller's satirical presentation of Reagan in *Dark Knight* confirms the model of the state as post-villain. Just like Batman, Reagan drew on a history of American genre fiction to legitimise himself as hero. Michael Rogin suggests Reagan's rise to power began with his Communist countersubversion work in Hollywood. At this point he was, essentially, a vigilante working for the state's goals as a private citizen (Rogin 1987: 30). Reagan's 'one-man battalion' against the Red danger evoked a spirit of frontier individualism and the wartime stories of Superman and Captain America; Rogin notes the double-meaning of Red as communist and Red as Native American which placed Reagan as a personal defender of (white) American values. His later transition from unsanctioned citizen-vigilante to head-of-state was also achieved through re-enactment: 'Reagan cloaked himself in Roosevelt's mantle' during his campaigns, incorporating FDR's speeches into his own 'at a time of economic and spiritual crisis comparable to the Great Depression' (Rogin 1987: 33). Reagan immersed himself in an American history to evoke a previous character and was, at first, more the counterpart to Batman than Superman or Joker. Re-enacting the narratives of the Depression and the Frontier in order to enforce a large-scale change upon the state (notably the transitions toward surveillance and away from welfare), he turned the heroic American into Klock's idea of the comic-book villain. As a counter, Miller recreates in Batman the role of the subversive, an alternative history which threatens Reagan's hegemonic American state.

The relationship between 'hero' and 'villain' has been pushed to the point of reversal by Miller. The hero becomes the dissenter, criminalised by the state, and the state

becomes the villainous counterpart, adopting the same techniques (and characters) of the hero to ensure its dominance and paint the hero as the villain. Batman is the red threat which Reagan fights in both senses here, for Batman's narrative has a precursor in white American depictions of the Indian as much as the Communist. Rogin notes the 'distinctive American political tradition that was fearful of primitivism' as a response to its exploitation of people of colour and their potential threat to the white settler (1987: 45). Similarly, Batman in Miller's conception represents a primitive, unsettling force. Batman is 'not human' (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005: 34), and exists on a border between animal and man. Indians, too, were 'animals, but […] men as well' (Rogin 1987: 46, quoting George Washington). Since both Batman and the Indian exist outside of the state, the threat they present is magnified. The Indian embodies the 'masterless man' who appears 'with the breakdown of traditional society' (Rogin 1987: 45). Appearing on horseback to charge against a city fallen into misrule, Batman appears as Miller's update on the same threat to 'civilised' society (Miller 2002: 182).

Whilst it is tempting to see this image, and the Batman mythology in general, as a development of a white American 'lawmaker' myth – the sheriff riding into town – Miller's focus on the animal nature of Batman suggests something more complex at work. Richard Slotkin famously argued that the American hero myth developed as European Romantic conventions were tempered by white American knowledge of 'the primary cource of blood-knowledge of wilderness, the "Indian" mind' (Slotkin 1973: 17). Miller's presentation of Batman harks back to this history, making Batman both cowboy and Indian and drawing out the commingling of the two archetypes of white American mythology.

Not only is the Indian a 'masterless man', but the rhetoric of American expansion commonly refers to Indians as children, infantilised in their savagery and requiring a guiding father figure (Rogin 1987: 137, 151). They are, in essence, foundlings or orphans. Rogin confirms the parallel when he discusses white America's first heroes, who prefigure Batman. He writes that 'these wilderness literary heroes lack a secure paternal birthright;

they are Ishmaels' (1987: 172), drawing the connection between Melville's narrator and his literary heritage as the biblical illegitimate son, forming a nation in the wilderness. The Indian, Ishmael, and Batman all represent the same aspect in a narrative where a state seeks to master or subsume a threat to order by positioning the outsider as animal, masterless, and orphan. The threat presented by the wilderness heroes, or the Indian, and the ability of the state to 'master' it relies on the metaphor of orphaning. The state must recognise the threat as existing outside its boundaries but also must demonstrate the threat to be fundamentally similar, with the potential to be incorporated rather than exterminated: they are animals, but men as well. It is these qualities which give rise to the multitudinous metaphors which evoke the object simultaneously distinct from and recognised by the state: the orphan, the monster, the animal which must be brought under control. Each of these metaphors tells a story of negative qualities, for which the subject is not culpable, which must be remedied through intervention. Agency is removed from the subject, for their own good and for good of everyone else. Consequently, Reagan's first request to Superman is not for extermination of Batman, but for control – to 'settle him down' like ranching a wild horse (Miller 2002: 84).

The duality of simultaneous recognition and exteriorisation points again to the importance of reflection in the conceptual schema of American culture. Eric Wertheimer has referred to this effect as 'Lacan at the frontier'. The frontier line and the 'semi-civilised Indian' form a 'semi-transparent mirror' which allows the viewer (the state) to look beyond its borders, but recognise itself there. In this conception, the mirror returns a variant of the self-image where the 'site of difference [between external image and self] becomes the occasion for a kind of nationally flattering self-recognition' (1999: 12-13). By recognising oneself yet recognising difference, the self-image which is problematic in Lacan becomes positive through the comparison with what has been exteriorised. The Indian, the wilderness man, the Batman are all presented as external problems by state discourse in order to flatter and reinforce the hegemonic structures that surround the viewer. The

modification to this metaphor proposed by Miller is to take the side of the subversive, valorising the hero as the one in the position of threat, on the other side of the mirror. Through a discourse which reinterprets and recycles previous eras, the state forms narratives in which a twisted reflection is a threat, but a subsumed one a benefit. Miller capitalises on this when creating his Batman as feral, orphan threat, who desires not to be subsumed but to destabilise the system that subsumes threats – a system created by villains to ensure their own dominance.[9]

The ability to turn the systems of the state against themselves is the heart of the resistance proposed by Hawthorne, Melville and Miller. Ahab, another of Melville's orphans, provides an exemplar. On land, Melville's description that 'the pulpit leads the world' suggests a state that leads through the creation of superstructures. The pulpit performs a vital function in the defence of the state, as 'from thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt' (Melville 1988: 40). The metaphor reoccurs in *Dark Knight*, where the newscaster warns of a storm like the 'wrath of God' headed for Gotham, and television news becomes a new version of Melville's pulpit (Miller 2002: 27). When the superstructures that protect the state are removed, via EMP in *Dark Knight* or through the shift from land to sea in *Moby Dick,* a new social order can be worked out. In *Moby Dick*, having left the state behind, Ahab imposes his own law: 'there is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod' (474). Batman undergoes a similar transformation: in the absence of the state, he is the law. In both cases, it is notable that the orphan subverts the language of the state's superstructures: Batman becomes the law, Ahab the lord. The discourse of the

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[9] It is worth repeating, at this point, that I am not arguing for a missed nuance of Miller as a supporter of Native Americans, or any similar rehabilitation of his critical reputation. The 'masterless man' partly originates in rhetoric about Indians in the United States, but Miller uncritically trades on this flawed narrative as part of a nebulous American identity. It is a great irony in the variety of formations of individual vs state narratives that they are malleable, and can be turned for or against anyone in power, or to support any number of repressive practices.

state holds such a role in shaping perception that it can be used against the state when the state-descried antagonist, the orphan, makes the shift from outsider to leader.

Ahab is no hero, of course, and Melville is not suggesting that his monomaniacal dictatorship of the *Pequod* is an ideal model for a country. The re-use of the state's discourse by the emerging revolutionary is the technique necessary to rebuild new from old, but it is also the method by which hegemony is cemented. Reagan also appropriated the language of the state in his quest to gain legitimacy, but rather than unmake the state he oversaw increases in its military spending and security apparatus. Even in areas where he had been a campaigner for cutbacks, the end result was to increase the power of the state. David Ginsberg (1987) has demonstrated that Reagan's rhetoric of freedom and his invocation of the ideals of the founding fathers whilst campaigning for healthcare deregulation were followed by what was in real terms a regulatory expansion in healthcare administration once he came to power. Unchecked, the same series of dialectic reversals and revolutions turns the dissident into the dictator, an idea demonstrated by the oppositional pairs in the texts: Batman and Reagan, Ishmael and Ahab. Miller shares with his nineteenth-century precursors a concern not only with the symbols, discourse and superstructures through which the state takes shape, but also with the process by which a state is established and maintained. The emerging or new state offers a combination of promise and threat and, left unchecked, it will replicate the forms of the authority it sought to undermine.

Hawthorne also prominently displays his concern with the foundations of the American nation-state during a period of rising challenge to its existence. As such, he offers the clearest literary background to *Dark Knight* in this instance. In *The Scarlet Letter,* he ties together two moments of nation-building. The introduction, 'The Custom House', frames Hawthorne's narrative of dissidence and excommunication in the early years of American colonisation within the bureaucracy of the antebellum Republic. At a point where the revolution has become a series of institutions, he looks to its foundations to

venerate those that challenged the emerging superstructures of law and religion in the new world. 'The Custom House' begins with two symbols of the institutional civil government, but Hawthorne embeds a suspicion and danger within these symbols, marking for the reader the potential of the state to turn from protector to threat. The flag, flying over the wharf, signifies that a 'civil, and not a military, post of Uncle Sam's government is here established' (Hawthorne 1983: 122). Something of significance, the reader might deduce, is to be found in the distinction. The second symbol of the state makes the implication clear. For Hawthorne, the eagle above the custom-house is a warning to citizens of America not to venture too close to the structures of their government, for she 'is apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw' (1983: 123). The danger that the new state appears benevolent is most important, for this will cause the greatest harm.

Miller reuses these two symbols of the United States – the flag and the eagle - to similar effect in *Dark Knight*. During Batman's investigation into misappropriated military weapons, Miller poses his hero with the flag covering the body of a corrupt general and a literal smoking gun (Miller 2002: 70). In this page, any previous attempt at a separation of the civil and military powers of the state has been exposed as a falsehood. Instead, the government has produced the conditions for Gotham's fall and Batman represents a civilian resistance that aims to rectify the situation. Miller's full-page splash should be read as though it were a single-panel political cartoon: the pose of the dead body in Batman's arms, covered by the flag, suggests that the symbolic representations of the state cover up corruption and military power yet the state is ultimately in the hands of its citizens. Later in the text, the transition from the image of the flag to the Superman shield reverses the metaphor (Miller 2002: 84). Superman's popular image as the American hero is made ironic as Miller's text reveals his intimacy with the government behind the flag, rather than with the people whom the government should represent. Reagan's reluctance to involve Superman in 'domestic affairs' repeats the concern with the façade of non-military government which Hawthorne first iterates. The state, in both cases, is hiding behind its

symbols. By repeating the use of the flag for both Batman and Superman, Miller reminds the reader that the individual citizen is his focus; the outlaw, rather than those in willing coalition with government, is the true American.

The eagle, which Hawthorne reserves for his most scathing criticism of government, is the animal Miller confers upon Superman, the counterpart to the Bat. The eagle appears to complement to the image of the American hero when Clark Kent, dressed as a civilian and in a frontiersman's pose, enters the world of *Dark Knight* (2002: 118-9). Whilst Clark appears benevolent and heroic, the eagle (and the previous identification of Superman with the state) creates an implicit threat. Superman is just as able and just as liable as the eagle to fling off the nestlings who seek his protection, as he does by unthinkingly subjecting Gotham to darkness (2002: 168). In the tradition of Hawthorne, Superman becomes the embodiment of the thoughtless might and untrustworthy protection of government. Hawthorne presents the 'law that condemned' Hester Prynne as a 'giant of stern features but with vigour to support as well as to annihilate' (1983: 185). Superman characterises himself with the same words: 'we must not remind them that giants walk the earth' (2002: 130). Superman, like the law, is an arm of the state more often brought out to annihilate rather than support those citizens who dissent. The state's symbols, which once promised protection, now enforce conformity.

In a particularly neat point of literary antecedence, the symbolic pattern of the eagle and the bat that is shared between Miller and Hawthorne is also shared by Poe. 'The Coliseum' returns to the metaphor of the fallen empire in the ruined city, exposing the undermining of state symbolism by a darker power. In the poem, there is a direct parallel to the climax of the opposition between Superman, the government power hiding behind reproductions of state symbolism, and Batman, the figure of resistance:

Here, where a hero fell, a column falls!

Here, where the mimic eagle glared in gold,

A midnight vigil holds the swarthy bat!

(Poe 1984: 72)

If the state's symbols are exposed as a front, how then should the superhero be written? After all, the superhero relies on the symbol as a marker of difference, and Batman's symbol is hardly different to Superman's. Again Miller works in the tradition of Hawthorne, master of the overdetermined symbol. For Hester Prynne, the 'badge of shame' which she is assigned to wear comes to represent 'Abel, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength' (Hawthorne 1983: 257). The badge becomes a signifier of a supernatural power, but this power comes from the virtues of the wearer. Whilst this looks like an early version of the superhero symbol, in a more direct prefiguring of Miller's writing the badge also gains its own supernatural power as an object. The scarlet letter's power of protection is not only symbolic, it also 'imparted to the wearer a kind of sacredness, which enabled her to walk securely amid all peril'. It even rebuffs physical attacks, such as when an 'Indian had drawn his arrow against the badge, and that the missile struck it, and fell harmless to the ground' (Hawthorne 1983: 258). In *Year One*, the Batman's ability to avoid missiles is symbolic: bullets pass 'straight through the creature' and Batman can walk securely amid peril (2005: 35). In *Dark Knight*, the badge acts exactly like Hester's letter, repelling direct hits from gunfire. Batman comments, rhetorically: 'Why do you *think* I wear a target on my chest -- can't armour my *head*' (2002: 51).

Presented as something the reader should already have known, despite it being a radical revision of Batman's costuming, Miller's transformation of the Bat symbol 'compels us to read as he reads, and to accept his stance and vision as our origin' (Klock 2002: 30-31). However, what Miller is compelling us to is not *his* vision of how superhero symbols work, but a nineteenth-century vision of the power of the symbol, in which its

power is assigned and accorded by its bearer. In *The Scarlet Letter* and in *Dark Knight*, what should be protective – the state, the flag, the eagle, Superman – becomes destructive and oppressive, but the reverse is also true. What should be destructive – the individual, the badge of shame, the bat, Batman – is turned from a source of fear into a symbol of protection and hope. Miller is remaking the resistance symbolism of Hawthorne as his own resistance, recreating in text the struggle of the individual against an oppressive and unjust state. This is both an attack on American politics and a rewriting of comics, rather than 'high' literature, as the inheritor of this American tradition of dissent.

Rewriting Poe

The necessity of rereading symbols, removing them from one discourse and bringing them into another, explains Miller's most direct incorporation of Poe. At the end of *Dark Knight*, a novel that has drawn from and obliquely referenced nineteenth-century American writing for its entire length, Miller makes Poe's detective stories the immediate inspiration for Batman. At that point, he formalises his purpose to position comics as the inheritor to the tradition of Poe. Reminiscing about Bruce's childhood, Alfred recalls reading him 'The Purloined Letter' (Miller 2002: 189). After noting its importance in detective fiction, we are told young Bruce 'demanded "the killer was caught. And punished"' and Alfred 'assured him that the villain had met justice' (2002: 190). Conspicuously, this is not the case. In Poe's version, 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, facilitated by Dupin – a civilian who takes payment in the form of a wager won from a police officer. In Miller's hands, the story changes from Poe's non-violent puzzle to a narrative of vengeance and judgement, yet this is not made explicit, and no explanation is offered. Once this inconsistency is

noticed, the initial question is of the authorship of the misreading – is this Frank Miller's misremembering, or Bruce's, or Alfred's? [10]

It is worth returning to Will Brooker's proposal that a variety of interpretations of the Batman reminds us that 'no readings are valid, and all readings are valid; anarchy, or solipsism, rule the debate' (2001: 21). In an anarchy of readings, such as that which Batman and Miller both must achieve in order to introduce slippage and eventually subvert their dominant signifying systems, the importance is on the retelling. By removing the story from its original – what we might consider Poe's 'Purloined Letter' – the reader's sense of authorship is challenged. The retold 'Purloined Letter' is more functional in the context Miller gives to it than Poe's tale, filling in some detail to the Batman's fictional biography and challenging the dominant cultural history of the superhero comic. Miller's retelling of Dupin as a violent detective seeking justice changes the tradition of the detective in American fiction and makes a direct line between Miller, Spillane, Chandler and Poe. In effect, by rewriting 'The Purloined Letter', Miller is remaking literary history.

The 'misremembered' retelling of Poe has a political purpose, both within the comic and outside it. Within the comic, a misreading or rereading that leaves the reader unable to determine from whom the reading is promulgated parallels Miller's presentation of Batman, with stories 'misremembered and retold alongside new ones' (Brooker 2001: 31). Miller's continual retelling of Batman's costuming and origin story forces the reader to read as he does and allows him to remake the Batman for his own ends. Doing the same for Poe, he separates the nineteenth-century tale from its history and its authorship: it is brought outside of its institutional home, and remade. The act challenges the way readers approach the text, having it exist outside of its familiar boundaries and changed to suit a

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[10] Additionally, there are some formal correspondences between *Dark Knight* and 'The Purloined Letter' which are worth mentioning. Both tales cover the final appearance of the private detective heroes Dupin and Batman, and both end with the promise of justice served upon the corrupt state following the end of narrative.

new purpose. This is, metaphorically, the process of orphaning repeated: the story is made malleable, dangerous and ultimately more gothic by removing it from its stable structure and known parentage. Through the process of orphaning, allowing an anarchy of readings, new developments can occur which challenge the status quo. Batman must undergo the same process when he remakes himself at the end of the novel.

As the book concludes, the panels following Wayne's funeral take the reader literally underground. Moving into the darkness, reclaiming what lies beneath, is the beginning of a new political movement for Batman. Miller has done the same throughout the text in his literary reclamations. 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). The metaphor extends further: in line with the long tradition of the river as a feature of American narratives, it is not merely Batman but American literature that is Miller's spring. 'It begins here', Wayne suggests whilst demonstrating to his audience his set of blueprints for what is to be built. It begins there for Miller too. Miller has provided the blueprint on which to build American superhero comics as a legitimate form, utilising the readily available foundations of prose culture as a base. His retelling of Batman, breaking down a previous tradition and recreating it for his own purpose, has made an orphan of the superhero comic. At the same time, the incorporation and rewriting of a literary history pushes the newly made form to stand on its own alongside its history – to 'grow up'. Miller has reconfigured history to place himself as an author emerging from the traditions which exclude him, and he has cleared the path for Dark Age comics to become what they both seek to separate from and now resemble – American literature.

'An age of illumination': *Watchmen*

Introduction: A New Dark Age

The first issue of *Watchmen*, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, was published in September 1986, just three months after the final issue of *Dark Knight*. For many, the comic was the most obvious indication that *Dark Knight* was not a one-off but part of a new trend in superhero comics. *Watchmen,* in the view of the critics and journalists of the time, became the second major work of the movement toward adult-oriented superhero comics that would come to be called the Dark Age. Today, even the briefest examination of fan sites or academic journals will demonstrate a dominant opinion that everything changed in 1986 and Moore's work in the 1980s is the unmatched apex of superhero writing. However, to see Moore as exceptional is to lose sight of the shared literary and historical culture of the moment, just as to read him only in comparison with Miller is to gloss over significant differences between the two writers. Even where Moore effected or became an exemplar of the changes of the 1980s, studies must balance Moore's individual contribution and idiosyncratic political stance with the role he played in the broader developments of the Dark Age. In this chapter, a primary critical analysis of hitherto overlooked aspects of *Watchmen* and its relationship to the nineteenth-century American Romance forms the main part of a reading which sees Moore not as a stand-alone figure, but aims to reframe him within the contexts of a narrative of the Dark Age. Given that the period moves from Miller's Batman to Gaiman's *Sandman* in a space of three years, my reading will place Moore's innovations and individual contributions as a link between the two very different works.

Concomitant with Miller's reimagining of the superhero in *Daredevil* and his Batman stories, the developments that would come to define the latter part of the Dark Age were being put in motion by a series of staffing changes at DC. The success of Moore's work on *Swamp Thing* provided the impetus for DC to send editor Karen Berger on a series of talent-scouting trips to the UK, with the aim of hiring emerging British and Irish writers and artists to capitalise on the growing demand for teenage and adult-oriented gothic and horror comics. Berger hired writers who had experience both in superhero writing at *Marvel UK* and in teenage and adult-oriented comics not subject to the Comics Code at titles such as *2000 AD* and *Warrior*, as well as offering work to new and experimental artists. DC's new recruits had grown up with American superhero comics but with an outsider's view of the ideology implicit in the superhero narrative (see, for example, Morrison 2012: xi-xv). Furthermore, they had developed as artists without the CCA's rules on content. From this background, they developed a reputation for engaging critically with the politics and genre traditions of the superhero comic.

The new British writers pushed American superhero comics toward experimental and sophisticated action, sci-fi and fantasy. They also brought with them gothic and occult aesthetics. The shift of the Dark Age toward a combination of British writers and occult themes is most obvious in the success of *Hellblazer*, first published in 1988. Where Miller's readings of nineteenth-century Romance focused on the tradition of the American detective story, *Hellblazer* focused on the English 'occult detective' John Constantine. Initially authored by the wholly British team of Jamie Delano, John Ridgeway and Dave McKean, the narrative origins of the title were in Moore's *Swamp Thing*, where John Constantine had first appeared. Recent work has demonstrated that Moore's comics can be read within a history of gothic writing that begins in England (Sheridan 2013: 180), and I intend to build on this work to argue that Moore is the keystone for this second phase of the Dark Age. Whilst *Swamp Thing* creates the financial and cultural space for these new developments to take place, I suggest in this chapter that it is his best-known text,

Watchmen, that bridges the gap between Miller's concerns with the superhero and detective traditions, and the gothic or fantasy revisions to the superhero of the later Dark Age.

       Watchmen is the crux on which a narrative of the Dark Age turns. The book brings a global viewpoint on the superhero to a mainstream American readership, and the beginnings of a different approach to the United States and its superheroes emerge. Miller's vision of America is often insular and exceptionalist, and his conception of history is fundamentally dialectic. However, in Moore there is a transatlantic consideration of the United States and an esoteric or gnostic understanding of the world that points toward Gaiman, Morrison, and *Hellblazer*. My conflation of esoteric and gnostic is deliberate at this point, for I will argue in this chapter that Moore's politics in *Watchmen* are based on mid-twentieth-century theoretical interpretations of utopian politics as flawed gnostic eschatology, provoking Moore to seek a more valid gnosis in the esoteric tradition. Having made such a statement, it almost goes without saying that, in *Watchmen,* Moore is taking a very different political line to Frank Miller in *The Dark Knight Returns*. It may have surprised the reader of the previous chapter that Frank Miller appears to have worked from a Marxist/Gramscian historiography. It will perhaps come as a further challenge to common readings of his work when I argue that Alan Moore, a writer more usually associated with revolutionary politics, develops in *Watchmen* a critique of revolutionary utopianism. Despite these radical differences, there is still a shared heritage that underlies the two texts, and justifies their inclusion as part of a single movement. Moore begins from a political position not entirely dissimilar from Miller, drawing on the same nineteenth-century

American writing for his critique of utopianism. [11]

There are models in nineteenth-century writing for Moore's politics just as there are for Miller's. Poe's satirising of mesmerism and Hawthorne's critique of the Transcendentalist project at Brook Farm originate in contemporary cultural negotiations between utopian idealism and pessimism (Kopley 2012: 611). Moore's heritage then diverges from Miller in the twentieth-century, when the idea of a gnostic eschatology at the heart of utopian politics is formulated theoretically by political scientist Eric Voegelin. In *The New Science of Politics* (1951), Voegelin critiques twentieth-century revolutionary movements, whether socialist or fascist, from the evidence of their origins in Christian eschatology. These movements, he argues, attempt to 'immanentiz[e] the eschaton': to shape history and make a new world as discovered through religious revelation within the current imperfect world. For Voegelin, this goal is logically flawed. The strength of his criticism resonated with the American suspicion of foreign-born radical politics (although Voegelin himself was a European émigré) and the term 'immanentize the eschaton' entered the American political lexicon during the 1950s, generally as a criticism used by conservatives against left-wing policies (see, for example, Goldberg 2002).

Moore's politics in *Watchmen* are indebted to the long history of this critique of utopian politics, and it is possible to trace its path through Moore's immediate influences back to a nineteenth-century origin. One of Moore's major influences is the writer Robert

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[11] Some terminology in this chapter may require further explanation. *Gnosis*, in this chapter, will be used according to Antoine Faivre's definition: 'an integrating knowledge, a grasp of fundamental relations including the least apparent that exist among various levels of reality, e.g., among God, humanity, and the universe. Gnosis is either this knowing in itself or the intuition and the certainty of possessing a method permitting access to such knowledge' (1994: 19). Eric Voegelin, whose use of the term was the most prominent in twentieth-century American political discourse, often conflates apocalypticism with gnosis, as his commentators acknowledge (Voegelin 2000: 14). Since Faivre stresses the soteriological nature of gnosis (1994: 20), I consider the term broadly applicable across all the relevant authors in this chapter. *Illumination*, in this chapter, is used interchangeably with the 'knowing in itself' portion of gnosis, as well as pointing to the varieties of esoteric societies which have aimed at inducing gnosis. Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's use of 'illumination' in *Illuminatus!* stems in part from Voegelin's criticism of gnosis, but highlights the connection between gnostic politics and conspiratorial fears of the Illuminati. Moore's similar preference for illumination over gnosis for its connotations comes from its use in his source fiction, particularly Shea and Wilson, and could be traced back to the nineteenth-century.

Anton Wilson, to whom Moore makes regular reference (e.g. Moore 2012: 74, 88). Wilson's most substantial and influential work of fiction is a satire of the combination of political revolutions and esoteric conspiracy common in 1960s countercultures. Written with Robert Shea and published as three volumes before being collected as *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975), the text begins: 'It was the year when they finally immanentized the Eschaton' (Shea and Wilson 1998: 7).[12] Although it is unabashedly satirical, *Illuminatus!*'s opening situates it within the conservative discourse that begins with Voegelin. Following this path, there is a line of descent for Moore's text that takes in the anti-Transcendentalist writers, Eric Voegelin, and Robert Anton Wilson. Given that a substantial amount of Moore's background material concerns conflicts and connections between political planning and esoterica, it perhaps unsurprising that that *Watchmen* acts as the point of negotiation for these ideas in the trajectory of the 1980s superhero comic.

Much of Moore's later work openly negotiates the encounter between rationalism and mystical thought and reinvents nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature. There are examples in his work after leaving DC in *From Hell*, *Neonomicon*, *Lost Girls*, *Promethea*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but Moore did not simply move from superhero comics to esoterica (as is sometimes suggested of his career). My aim is not to dismiss these later texts, but to concentrate on *Watchmen* in order to demonstrate the ways in which the Dark Age was shaped by these ideas even before they defined Moore's career. Of course, *League* is the most forthright reworking of gothic and adventure literature into the superhero genre mentioned by name anywhere in this study, and *From Hell* is the most obvious example of a return to the nineteenth-century in comics of the 1980s. Although I will not dwell on these works, they offer a valuable resource that should

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[12] Arthur Versluis describes Wilson's fiction as a 'compendium of countercultural themes' of the 1960s, and the 'literary version' of the era's drug-induced anti-government paranoia. Today, Wilson is mainly remembered for his contributions to and popularising of Discordianism, a blend of new-age religion and practical joke that deliberately encouraged and promoted ridiculous conspiracy theories within popular culture as a method of justifying a libertarian/anarchist politics (Versluis 2014: 130-133).

not be ignored when considering the Dark Age of the major superhero publishers. In *From Hell*, the identity of Jack the Ripper is subsumed by a discourse of esoteric and conspiratorial currents in Victorian society. Moore took inspiration from Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*, recalling that the book was 'the twist I needed' for *From Hell*: 'A holistic detective? You wouldn't just have to solve the crime, you'd have to solve the entire world that that crime happened in' (Moore and Graydon 2015). In aiming to create a holistic interpretation of Victorian society, Moore must cover its science, its beliefs, its mysticism and its cultural background, and propose the confluence of these as the true culprit. In other words, Moore indicts a society simply by offering an overview of its functioning. Understanding the goal of this 'holistic' viewpoint (i.e. to observe in totality, at some distance) is vital to reading Moore's work.

Reading *Watchmen* as a similar indictment of an entire society alters how Moore's aesthetic choices are interpreted: the multiple narratives and mixed media within the work take on a critical, political purpose. The 'twist' in *Watchmen* comes not from the temporal remove of *From Hell,* but the geo-cultural remove from which Moore, as an outsider, perceives the United States. Moore's America is near-contemporary to his writing of *Watchmen*, but it is an alternative world, imagined by an outsider, that is supposed to better reflect the state of American politics than the 'real' United States seen by Americans. Moore therefore offers to an American readership a literal instance of what Paul Giles would later call a 'virtual America'. In the 1980s, the superhero market had become transnational without its assumptions of exceptionalism being challenged. Moore's importation of a vision of America which originates outside of its geo-cultural location then created an America 'categorized in terms of feedback systems and loops of communication [which] has more contemporary relevance than the old model of a sacred land' (Giles 2002: 283). This interpretation is not obviously synchronous with a criticism of gnostic politics in the tradition of Voegelin. Yet, in Ozymandias, Moore has created a character who gains illumination and an eschatological program for a New World (a global America) during a

journey to the Old World. *Watchmen* then becomes a narrative whose primary concerns are both the critique of utopian millenarianism and the growth of unchallenged American hegemony.

A very different politics to that which preceded it in the Dark Age is visible in *Watchmen*, although the pattern from which these politics are derived is resolutely the same. Like Miller's Batman, *Watchmen* stems from a set of concerns found within nineteenth-century literature, filtered through a lens of twentieth-century political science and genre fiction. Where Miller seeks to forcibly position Batman within the tradition of American literature, using his work as a rupturing tool, Moore's position in *Watchmen* is as an observer – a watchman. Moore is feeding back a personal vision of the United States, gained from his position as a consumer of American culture outside of its original home and associated ideology. Moore's politics aims to hand back control of the world to its citizens not in the sense of the Millerian hero, the individual who wishes to wrest and hand back control from an authority, but in the sense that it is the individual's knowledge of the world that is the ultimate authority. In one sense, where Miller confronted an ontological problem of the composition of American identity and culture, Moore turns this question into one of epistemology.

Rather than seek to rupture an existing system of knowledge (such as the canon of American literature), Moore seeks to question the fundamental basis for that knowledge. Gnosis is at the heart of *Watchmen*, driving a story which ultimately asks the reader of the text to interpret the world and determine their own perception, to impose their own design onto the world just as Moore's characters must do. In this way, a criticism of all 'gnostic politics' and structures of power is enacted through gnosis itself. The text highlights the transformative potential of individual revelation as a method of circumventing the strictures of hegemony and ideology, but criticises attempts to bring about a New Age for humanity based on the knowledge of an individual prophet. For Moore, the difference between true gnosis and gnostic politics is found by separating knowledge gained from others and

knowledge gained from within (esoteric knowledge). This reading is backed up by Moore himself, who was open about his program for *Watchmen,* stating: 'I suppose the central question of *Watchmen* is the question that Dr Manhattan asks of himself on Mars, which is, "who makes the world?"'. What I was trying to say in *Watchmen* is that we *all* make the world' (2012: 47). Moore is attempting to disperse authority and hand it back to the reader or observer, pre-empting the political machinations of an intermediary leader.

From Miller to Moore: The Gnostic Flâneur

Moore's contribution to the Dark Age draws on the same nineteenth-century material as Miller, but for a different end: illumination rather than revolution. For Moore, differences between the two texts are the result of an underlying difference of purpose: claiming that '*Dark Knight* is a superhero adventure with moral and political ideas added in; *Watchmen* is a moral and political story with superheroes' (2012: 56). Moore's statement tacitly acknowledges that the two works are at the very least superficially similar in their final form. However they got there, both works are superhero comics with a dark or Gothic aesthetic that focus on the moral and political state of America in the 1980s. My argument in this chapter (and, more broadly, in this thesis) is that Moore's *Watchmen* is an integral part of a movement in which the cumulative qualities of the major works create a revolutionary change to the superhero comic, yet each work deserves separate attention and creates its innovative content through a different appropriation of a similar background (nineteenth-century American gothic, the superhero comic). It is therefore necessary to spend some time elucidating and insisting upon the similarities that the two works share in order to demonstrate the ways in which they differ.

One of the clearest links between Miller and Moore is their use of an alternate future-present, a technique that goes some way to explaining their critical conflation to this point. Whilst both works are careful to timestamp their setting as contemporary to their

publication dates, the political and social structures and level of technological advancement in the worlds they present are fantastic distortions of contemporary America, constituting what I have already referred to in Miller as a techno-gothic setting. The setting balances two of the defining feature of Dark Age comics: it creates a fictional space that can reasonably incorporate the fantastic or unreal superhero whilst retaining enough 'reality' to allow for a more in-depth consideration of the politics and psychology of the superhero character. As with a number of significant features of Moore's work, this techno-gothic setting can be directly related to Moore's reading of nineteenth-century fiction. Claire Sheridan's (2013) argument for the similarity between William Godwin, his daughter Mary Shelley, and Moore could be extended to note *Frankenstein's* place as the exemplar novel for the combination of gothic atmosphere, scientific experimentation and psychological melodrama that makes up *Watchmen*.

Frankenstein is undeniably an influence on Moore, most evident in his 1984 comic 'Monster' from the short-lived title *Scream!* and in his work on *Swamp Thing.* Within a body of work almost wholly involved with the border between the real and the fantastic in some way, Moore's recurrent attention to in-depth character development for recognisably non-human, partially-human, or monstrous characters is as much of a defining trait as his political and social criticism. The characters of Dr Manhattan, or Swamp Thing, explore the personal and psychological ramifications of technological experimentation and indict the societies in which these 'monsters' live. Moore's texts then resemble Hawthorne's description of Romance, which 'sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart [but] has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation'. Hawthorne's method prefigures the gothic qualities of the Dark Age superhero narrative, suggesting that that the writer 'manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows, of the picture' and 'mingle the marvellous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor' (1983: 351). In the Dark Age, Moore and Miller de-emphasised the

grand fantasy worlds and simplistic morals of the Jack Kirby-esque Silver Age superhero in favour of a world that focuses on 'the truth of the human heart' with only the 'flavor' of the marvellous. Like Shelley's techno-gothic or Hawthorne's Romance, the 1980s comics' characteristic balance of real and unreal offered an opportunity for political and social criticism within the paradigm of the fantastic.

Although Moore and Miller are adapting a paradigm announced by Hawthorne, the method of presenting their setting comes from Poe's flâneur and detective tales. Both writers leaven their superhero narrative with social and political critique by interweaving a media culture, and its discourses on crime and social affairs, into their narratives. From this, a method of constructing and understanding the world is created that connects the superhero and the nineteenth-century flâneur. The connection is hinted at by previous work in American literature. Dana Brand suggests that the newspaper makes the complex urban environment available for consumption, noting several examples of the phenomena in nineteenth-century writing including Poe's construction of the urban environment out of newspapers in 'The Man of the Crowd' and 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'. In an evocative passage, Brand asserts that 'a reader of newspapers, a viewer of panoramas, or any individual engaged in the modern activity of viewing images or viewing reality as if it were composed of images, is in a situation eerily analogous to [Hawthorne's] Wakefield' (1991: 117). The same might be said of the methods of determining the environment that Miller gives to Batman and Moore to Rorschach and Ozymandias: each use a method of reading newspapers, or viewing images, to gain some insight into reality, suggesting a shared point of origin in the American Romance (for example, Moore and Gibbons 1987: X:8).

With a slight update to the methods of image and information dissemination, Moore and Miller bring the flâneur's image-construction of the urban environment into the twentieth century. The newspaper becomes the television in the case of *Dark Knight,* giving both the reader and Batman an insight into what Poe had previously called the 'Doings of

Gotham'.[13] Ozymandias' method of understanding the world from the observation of television screens – 'information in its most concentrated form' – is explicitly a method of constructing the world from fragments (Moore and Gibbons 1987: X:7).[14] Rorschach's detective/flâneur methodology is much the same, seen in a panel which emphasises his process of walking the streets of the city whilst 'weighing factors; bodies; motives' (V:6). In both cases, the world is built up from a combination of media input and personal insight; public discourse is merged with individual assessment. Hawthorne's edict that the Romance must represent the 'truth of the human heart' in circumstances of the writer's choosing underlies this method of character and world creation. The balance of a personal assessment of the world against the factual or public perception of these circumstances is the core of flâneur narratives: often they tell the reader more about the human character in the act of observing than they do about their ostensible object.

The method of interpolating a human character to fill in the gaps between fragmented images reveals Moore's particular gnostic purpose. Significantly for Moore, the method of viewing images is not restricted to the superheroes in his work. Instead, the method is common to all characters within the comic, and an explicit connection is made between these characters and the history of comics itself. The recurring character of the newspaper vendor in *Watchmen* constructs a large proportion of his worldview from the newspapers he sells. These newspapers are presented in dialogue with the adventure comics he also sells, which are interjected into the narrative (Moore and Gibbons 1987: V:17). The comparison between newspapers and comics as artefacts of print culture which share the same commercial space (the newspaper stand) emphasises the role of the reader in both

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[13] Poe's 'Doings of Gotham', a series of articles for the *Columbia Spy* on daily life in New York, are largely forgotten today. The title, however, adds another minor piece to the collection of evidence demonstrating the longstanding relationship between the superhero and the American Romance. What, after all, are the many ongoing series of Batman stories but another 'doings of Gotham'?

[14] Page references for *Watchmen* follow the division in the graphic novel, with Roman numeral for chapter and Arabic for page within that chapter. All parenthetical references in this format are to Moore and Gibbons 1987.

media. In comics, interpolating the reader's response into the narrative is a necessary feature of reading: the gutter acts as an interstitial space where the reader fills in the gap between images (McCloud 1994: 67). The same is true for a character who understands a whole world by connecting a series of separate newspaper articles and for the reader of *Watchmen*, a comic perhaps bought at a newsstand, who must connect the comics, newspaper articles, television news and any other variety of media inputs to create a cohesive image of the world. In Faivre's definition, gnosis is 'an integrating knowledge, a grasp of fundamental relations including the least apparent that exist among various levels of reality' (1994: 19). Moore's gnostic text connects a comic, a world that contains that comic, and a comic that contains that world, across three 'levels of reality' through an integrating method of knowing.

In *Watchmen*, all readers are like Batman, Ozymandias, Rorschach and the newspaper-seller as they struggle to make sense of a fragmentary image culture. Yet, for some characters, the gnostic method is truly revelatory: Ozymandias believes his skill in assembling the fragmentary images of hundreds of television channels at once allows him to divine the course of the world. Moore's leaderless politics require that this power is not restricted to the superheroes of the text, but is available to all readers. Moore demonstrates, in Chapter V, the potential 'hints of the future' (XI:1) that can be gained from a successful use of the Ozymandias method. The text juxtaposes the phrases 'Veidt's a real hero […] he had nothing to hide', 'we exist upon the whim of murderers', and 'where's it gonna end?' in the same panel (Moore and Gibbons 1987: V:17). Reading information from two different media, newspapers and comics, at the same time offers an associative hint of Veidt's plan, and how the book will end. The degree of foreshadowing in a text like *Watchmen* prioritises the act of watching and being able to read trans-medially, and the same requirement for combining multiple media inputs is reflected throughout a text that incorporates a variety of textual forms in every chapter. Both the characters and the readers of *Watchmen* are required to synthesise multiple inputs simultaneously to perceive an

'intelligible, meaningful whole' (Voegelin 2000: 179). Sometimes, if this is done correctly, the future can be perceived. Here, the gnostic content of Moore's text moves toward the second element of Faivre's definition. Not only does it reinforce the idea that there is a connection between several levels of reality, it provides a reliable method for achieving gnosis: a necessary principle of the gnostic revelation (Faivre 1994: 19).

Moore's lesson that understanding relies on multiple inputs and reader-interpolation is complicated by the inclusion of a double-vision of history that requires the reader to juggle multiple real and fictional timelines. The ideal reader of Moore's world must not only be able to read trans-medially but also trans-temporally: a situation which, on a larger scale, the Dark Age implicitly requires of its readers as it reworks pre-existing narratives from an earlier time and a different form. The gnosis Moore seeks to bring about is only available to a reader who can see temporally forward (like the best detective stories, reading *Watchmen* again and already knowing how the story ends offers an entirely different experience). But, the secondary significance of the knowledge to be gained is only available to a reader who can balance the multiple timelines the book insists upon, understanding the simultaneous contextualisation and reconfiguration of literary history Moore has enforced. If this seems unreasonably complex, that is Moore's intention. By incorporating fragments and pushing the reader to utilise techniques already unconscious within the reading of comics to understand the world he creates, Moore is deliberately aligning himself with the Dark Romantic method which requires the reader to interpolate themselves as a detective among fragmentary information. The reader must learn to read across media, genre and time in order to construct a complete picture – the panoptic position of Dupin or Ishmael is gained by the reader only on a second reading.

Consequently, Moore's method comes to resemble what Viola Sachs has identified as the gnostic method of Hawthorne and Melville. In order to grasp something as complex and unknowable as the nature of the world, the reader is forced to explore every angle of the world, as depicted through its interlocutors, in order to assemble the picture that the

author presents. I suggested previously that Melville's 'Extracts' are comparable to Miller's incorporation of a literary background. Here, Miller and Moore diverge, for Moore is reading Melville for a different purpose. Miller alludes to earlier literature to rework and ultimately separate himself from the trappings of historical background and ideology. Moore develops the 'consciously coded message based on […] a whole set of correspondences of words, images, evoked graphical signs […] colors, letters, phonemes' which Melville demonstrates through the historical and linguistic correspondences with which he begins his work (Sachs 1980: 133). The reader does not need to take Sachs' controversial reading of the esoteric coding of *Moby Dick* to its furthest conclusion (although one suspects Moore might) to see that that in Moore, reading the text and reading the world often becomes an exercise in hermeneutics that leads to revelations of an unseen nature. As Ishmael notes, and practices regularly in the ekphratic expositions of images scattered throughout *Moby Dick*, reading any event requires the understanding that 'it must symbolise something unseen' (Melville 1988: 39). In Moore's terms, we are all readers, as Rorschach and Ozymandias attempt to be, navigating simultaneously the past, present, and future through the cultural input we receive. Recalling a stock phrase from adventure novels that Moore and Melville both utilise, Rorschach describes this navigation as searching for 'a flash of enlightenment in all this blood and thunder' (V:6).

From Miller to Moore: The Outcast Detective

Frank Miller adapted Poe's Dupin at the level of the text, positing his own version of Dupin as a direct influence on Bruce Wayne. Moore, on the other hand, takes from Poe's detective stories the techniques of assembly and interpretation used to make sense of a world composed of images. The role of the detective which Batman and Rorschach inherit from Poe's stories also offers another viewpoint on the synchronicities and divergences between Moore and Miller. Bill Boichel has argued for the importance of newspaper accounts of criminality as a catalyst in the development of the superhero on the basis that 'operating outside the law, on their own terms, and at the expense of the status quo, criminals fascinated many a consumer of popular culture' (1991: 7). His argument makes a connection between newspaper reporting and crime-fighting that is embedded in *Watchmen* as much as it is in *Dark Knight*. Newspaper accounts of criminality have a central role in creating Rorschach – *Watchmen's* most diligent reader of newspapers. In part, the character derives from Steve Ditko's the Question, an investigative journalist with a philosophy based on Ayn Rand's objectivism (Cooke 2000). Moore's approach blends the right-wing outlook and costume of Ditko's character with Miller's interpretations of the superhero-investigator that harks back to Poe. The result is a 'hero' operating outside of the law and status quo whose worldview is created by the sensationalist crime reports and stories of societal collapse in the right-wing newspaper the *New Frontiersman*.

Previously, Ditko and Miller had leant on an interpretation of the superhero as an extension of the detective for their characters. Rorschach, like Ditko's Question, evokes the history of the American detective in his characterisation. Both investigators wear a fedora, trench coat and pinstripe outfit that harks back to the fashions at the height of the hard-boiled crime era, as does the tough, interrogative persona they adopt as a crime-fighters. Rorschach, however, is no gumshoe sleuth. His violent means, paranoia, and lack of social convention go beyond the rakish qualities imputed to Spade, Marlowe, Holmes or Dupin.

Where Marlowe remains attractive to women despite his behaviour, Rorschach is defined early in the text by his threatening and unpleasant qualities (I:23). In Moore, the detective-superhero parallel is exposed as flawed and incompatible with the realities of the crimes detectives and superheroes investigate. Moore makes clear to the reader that both criminal and hero-detective, despite their fascinating effect for consumers of popular culture, would share the same dysfunctional attitudes to society should they be forced to operate in a world which is even slightly similar to the world of the reader. Moore's purpose differs in his adoption of the theme of the superhero: rather than have the superhero as flawed saviour of society, the superhero reflects back at American society a criticism of attitudes toward the solution of crime.

The clearest parallel between Rorschach and Dupin comes from their reading of newspapers. Moore's incorporation of the murder of Kitty Genovese into *Watchmen* is comparable to Poe's use of the Mary Rogers murder for 'The Mystery of Marie Roget'. Mary Rogers' corpse was discovered in the Hoboken River in 1841, and Rogers' story quickly became a 'product of [the] new popular, rapidly expanding commercial culture' of the press. With sensationalist reports selling papers, the mystery also became 'an extended metaphor for the city', creating even more column inches as part of a public discourse on moral degradation in new urban environments (Srebnick 1995: 62-3). Poe's response was to fictionalise the murder, giving the case to Dupin to solve using the newspaper reports as evidence. Over a century later, a similar pattern emerged. Kitty Genovese's murder in 1964 entered the public consciousness after a number of newspaper reports suggested thirty-eight bystanders had witnessed her being attacked but had done nothing. Although the reporting was rife with inaccuracy, the story took hold with the 'hyperbolic quality or an urban legend or myth'. It underscored the public belief in urban moral degradation and became a staple of psychology textbooks and crime fiction (Lurigio 2015). In both cases, the murder of a young woman was exploited by a print culture able to simultaneously trade on fears of violent urban crime, moral outrage, and the fascination of the spectacle.

For crime-writers, notorious murders and mysteries create an opportunity to deploy the figure of the detective operating outside the boundaries of the law. For writers attuned to the shared space of sensationalist newspapers, penny dreadfuls and comic books, as both Poe and Moore are, there is an opportunity to combine gothic sensationalism with social critique. Moore's most directly analogous work to 'Marie Roget' in this case is *From Hell*, where he gives himself the Dupin role and proffers a solution to a real-life crime, reconstructed through documentary evidence. For Rorschach, the critique has a different purpose. The case of 'Kitty Genovese […] Raped. Tortured. Killed. Here. In New York' (VI:10) is not a puzzle to be solved but an inspiration to vigilantism which draws from the urban anxiety that surrounds the event – the inability of the police to prevent and solve crime in a crime-ridden environment. This is the same core issue which inspires Batman, as Miller shows the reader when he re-purposes the puzzle of 'The Purloined Letter' as a tale of retributive justice.[15]

In his introduction to the collected edition of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore both praised and appeared to creatively mis-read the role of true crime in Miller's work:

> The Bat-man himself, taking account of our perception of vigilantes as a
> social force in the wake of Bernie Goetz, is seen as a near-fascist and
> dangerous fanatic by the media […] the values of the world we see are
> no longer defined in the clear, bright, primary colours of the
> conventional comic book but in the more subtle and ambiguous tones
> supplied by Lynn Varley's gorgeous palette and sublime sensibilities.
> (Moore 1986) [16]

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[15] It is worth noting that Moore is clearly aware of the parallel between the superhero and Dupin. He performs a similar utilisation of Dupin as background when he recreates the 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' in the first book of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.*

[16] Moore's introduction is not printed in newer editions of *Dark Knight*. The reason for its removal may be that he points out the unsaid real-world content of Miller's work but it is just as likely to be the public differences of opinion the two writers have had in recent years.

Moore's comment unveils that there is also a headline-grabbing criminal case at the heart of Miller's vision of contemporary urban America. In 1984, Bernhard Goetz shot and wounded four young black men on the New York subway. Goetz was found not guilty of attempted murder, stating he believed the men were going to mug him. The case and its outcome divided America. Like Rogers' and Genovese's cases, the story 'was born amid the tensions and anxieties of the urban crisis', and produced a large number of newspaper commentaries and fictional treatments which 'utilized the events […] to crystallize the feelings of New Yorkers about their city' (Brooks 1998). Poe, Miller and Moore come into alignment at this point as crime writers. Each writes their character as versions of a 'ideal' response to a real situation where the police and the state have failed and, in doing so, claims a position for their middle-ground art-form as capable of 'subtle and ambiguous tones'. However, whilst comics and magazine stories are promoted as suitable vehicles to respond to a print culture, each example still promotes a masculine hero-figure in response to violence against a vulnerable group. As is often the case in both dark ages, the move toward cultural legitimacy again involved a side-lining of the marginalised positions that are at the heart of the narratives.

Although both Miller and Moore focus on the hero at the expense of the vulnerable, Moore is far more critical of the narrative of the hero. From Moore's assessment of Miller's work, Miller's incorporation of political and moral content into what is fundamentally a superhero narrative has a limited scope of available viewpoints. Although the critique of contemporary New York is only made overt by Moore's allusion to Bernie Goetz in his introduction, Miller's assessment of the dangerous urban environment is aimed at a state which cannot protect its citizens. In Miller's case, this approach to the situation relies on the idea that the police are not simply ineffective but an arm of a repressive state: authority sides with authority and abandons a notion of the public good. In an environment where crime goes unpunished and media reporting of moral degradation is the norm, Batman is a heroic response. The core of Miller's work then comes in its negotiation of the role of the

hero in this situation, caught in an outsider position that the state enforces, and the psychological implications that come from an attempt to work for 'good' (i.e. for the populace rather than the state). Within this assessment, citizen vigilantism is an example of social degradation but the state, not the citizen, is to blame for the presence of the vigilante. In this way, Batman is heroic despite being realistically little more than a vigilante in costume.

For Moore, the opposite is true. No hero can be truly heroic in *Watchmen*, and the most direct Batman analogue – Rorschach – is so changed by the role the superhero must take that he has lost the ability to see nuance.[17] Refusing state regulation, just like Batman in *Dark Knight*, Rorschach operates outside the state with his own program of good and evil – a value system of 'black and white […] not mixing. No gray' (VI:10). Where Miller and Varley apply 'subtle and ambiguous tones' to the values of the comic book world Batman inhabits, Moore demonstrates the limits of the values of the superhero world by applying real-world outcomes to a world that cannot bear their weight. When it cannot, he exposes the inherent structural deficiencies of two-sided worldview, brought out when the concept of the superhero interacts with the politics of modern America. Making connections between Goetz and Miller's Batman, or between the media response to the murder of Kitty Genovese and the creation of Rorschach, Moore acknowledges and criticises the role of print culture in shaping national and personal politics. The 'black and white' of the superhero story or the newspaper report of true crime is not a reflection of a real world, and the challenge to injustice presented by the vigilante does not automatically make them a hero.

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[17] Note that my reading of Rorshach as a Batman analogue is specific to the version of Batman made famous by Miller. Although space restrictions permit expansion here, the gadget-using camp cavalier Batman of the 1960s has a similar 'real-world' parallel in Nite Owl II. Note also that the Batman-Rorschach parallel applies only to the costumed persona – the two characters could not be more opposite in their economic backgrounds.

Rorschach and Batman share a number of points of similarity that can be traced to nineteenth-century gothic writing. The anxiety and disillusionment Rorschach expresses at his urban environment is, like Miller's Batman, drawn directly from the anxieties about urban life described by Hawthorne and Poe. Rorschach's concern over the murder of Kitty Genovese has another direct precursor in *The House of the Seven Gables*. His statement that 'almost forty neighbours heard screams. Nobody did anything' (VI:10) emphasises the paradox of urban atomisation, where living in close proximity resulted in emotional distance. From this experience, Rorschach will determine a need for the crime-fighter. A century prior, Hawthorne placed Hepzibah in a similar position to Kitty Genovese, in need of a hero but surrounded by passers-by:

> Was there no help in their extremity? It seemed strange that there should be none, with a city round about her. It would be so easy to throw up the window, and send forth a shriek, at the strange agony of which everybody would come hastening to the rescue, well understanding it to be the cry of a human soul, at some dreadful crisis! But how wild, how almost laughable, the fatality—and yet how continually it comes to pass, thought Hepzibah, in this dull delirium of a world—that whosoever, and with however kindly a purpose, should come to help, they would be sure to help the strongest side! Might and wrong combined, like iron magnetized, are endowed with irresistible attraction. There would be Judge Pyncheon—a person eminent in the public view, of high station and great wealth, a philanthropist, a member of Congress and of the church, and intimately associated with whatever else bestows good name—so imposing, in these advantageous lights, that Hepzibah herself could hardly help shrinking from her own conclusions as to his hollow integrity. The Judge, on one side! And who, on the other? The guilty Clifford! Once a byword! Now, an indistinctly remembered ignominy! (Hawthorne 1983: 561)

Hawthorne depicts an environment where preference is given to upholding a strong (near-authoritarian) state rather than offering aid to its citizens. This presentation is most obviously similar to Miller's social criticism, rather than Moore's worldview, yet the passage sums up Rorschach's concerns in one image. Rorschach's realisation that the police will not help the state's citizenry, and that he must act as an individual (VI:18) is magnified by the indication Hawthorne gives of a distinctly two-sided narrative – the judge on one side, Clifford on the other. Hepzibah's concern with the 'hollow integrity' of the judge is repeated in Rorschach's valorisation of 'decent men' (I:1). Both Batman and Rorschach channel the concerns of the nineteenth-century urban environment, and the hard-boiled detective, when they position themselves against a morally corrupt governing elite who cannot be trusted to ensure the safety of their citizens, but Rorschach takes this commentary to its limit. He complicates the narrative of the triumph of moral superiority on which the superhero story had traditionally relied by being openly repulsive, certifiably insane, and never gaining the reprieve given to Batman or Clifford.

The characterisation of Rorschach and Batman in the mode of outcast detective emphasises the psychological inability of the hero to compromise, follow an alternative vision, or integrate into the society of the state. Ultimately, this type of hero is ostracised even among the outcast society of the superhero team. The group of heterogenous superheroes working together to fight crime is an essential, yet under-investigated, part of the cultural background of superheroes. With its first examples in the 1940s' Justice Society of America (Weiner 2005: 94), by the 1980s the idea of a team of superheroes sharing a common purpose was so familiar to readers that it could be an implicit background to the narrative of *Dark Knight*. Where Superman is able to reach a compromise with the state, and the rest of the Justice League abandons their heroic roles, 'wild obsession' continues to drive Batman to his radical purpose (Miller 2002: 120). In *Watchmen*, the superhero team is an essential plot point, but the story is still focused on the breakdown of the team rather than its success. As Richard Reynolds has argued, the

'normal conventions' of the superhero team are undercut by a narrative that emphasises the 'differences in powers, […] moral and political temperament' between the heroes (1992: 115). When the team is forced to disband, Rorschach suffers the same fate as Batman, coming to be regarded as 'sick inside his mind' by other heroes for his refusal to abandon his goals (I:23). Through his refusal to compromise he becomes, as Miller describes Batman, 'the one who scared the crap out of everybody and laughed at all of the rest of us' (Miller 2002: 'Introduction'). In both Miller and Moore, there is a recognisable pessimism toward the potential for a team of outsiders to reform the state, coupled with an uneasiness toward those attracted to these outsider groups. Some people, it seems, are too much the outsider even for radical collective action.

Miller and Moore share a pessimism toward collective action with the American Romance. The hero who is made an outcast and a monster even amongst a society of outcasts is also a major factor in the characterisation of Hollingsworth in *The Blithedale Romance*, a text I suggested above as a precursor to Miller's Batman. Hollingsworth's role within the society at Blithedale is exactly that of an outsider pursuing a singular goal and unwilling to compromise. Because of this, he appears monstrous to the other outsiders in his pursuit of what is apparently a public good. Coverdale's observations on Hollingsworth suggest exactly the observations Superman and Oliver Queen will make of Batman, or Laurie will make of Rorschach: 'I began to discern that he had come among us actuated by no real sympathy with our feelings and our hopes, but chiefly because we were estranging ourselves from the world, with which his lonely and exclusive object in life had already put him at odds' (Hawthorne 1983: 679). With one character-type across three works, the similarity demonstrates Moore and Miller working in the same space, using the same archetype informed by a specific reading of Batman and a specific reading of American culture.

Despite this shared archetype, the two writers take different roads in their adaptations. Miller de-emphasises the role of the superhero group or 'society of outcasts' in

direct opposition to the way Moore over-emphasises it. Miller acknowledges the existence of other heroes and incorporates them towards the end of *Dark Knight*, but Batman's role in the Justice League has little relevance to the plot. Moore, on the other hand, incorporates two societies of heroes, the Minutemen and the Crimebusters, and gives full details on their roster and history. The difference is revealing, indicating the way in which readings of similar literatures can be adapted to fulfil dissimilar purposes. Robert Levine suggests the close-knit group of utopian and progressive idealists at the heart of *Blithedale* should be seen as Hawthorne's response to the fear of conspiracy and the imminent collapse of the state in his contemporary society (2009: 4). Struggling with a state seen as corrupt and corrupting, and faced with potential infiltration, the Transcendentalist response is to remove oneself from society to discover a more moral way to live – a vision taken up by Batman in the ending to *Dark Knight.* In the case of Blithedale and the Crimebusters, the understanding that 'somebody has to save the world' (II:11) is complicated by a group who have radically different (and opposing) visions of the necessary process. Unlike the Comedian, who rejects the idea that the group or the world matters, Rorschach believes the world is facing an apocalypse, but will only work towards his own vision of how to prevent this: 'not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise' (XII:20).

Rorschach's choice not to compromise and work with the group therefore aligns him with Hollingsworth, but also hints at another major character of the Dark Romance: Bartleby, the embodiment of a refusal to compromise. Bartleby's refusal to change will lead him on a course toward jail and ultimately death, a fate he shares with Rorschach. In the process, as both characters run up against emblems of American capitalist power, their refusal to compromise exposes the violence at the heart of their society. Particularly for Rorschach, his singular vision will unravel the conspiracy at the heart of the narrative, validating his analytical faculties if not the behaviour with which they are associated. Rorschach emphasises the deterministic endpoint of the superhero archetype through a set of fears which haunt both periods. Exposing a vision of conspiracy at the heart of society

which the hero must unpick, but which will drive him to his death, gnostic vision is tempered by Moore with the dangers of attempting to use individual revelation to combat the course of history. For Moore, as for Melville, political change is not as simple as just refusing to compromise. Moore is adapting the politics and methods of Miller and incorporating his own influences from nineteenth-century American writing in order to construct a narrative which addresses many of the same concerns, but introduces several new ones. Primarily, Moore challenges Miller's revolutionary patriotism with a vision of a complex world revealed through the insight of the individual. Rather, Moore's point is to demonstrate that 'the world is far more complex than our political systems would sometimes have us believe' (Moore 2012: 48).

Conspiracy and Revelation

In Moore's view, as the quotation above demonstrates, political systems are either unconvincingly reductionist or deliberately misleading. The ways in which they approach their object either misunderstands or elides the true nature of the human world. Moore's comment resembles Marxist thinking about ideology: in Althusser's formation, developed in part from the Gramscian idea of hegemony, there is an 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' promulgated by the political and cultural superstructures of the state (2001:109). With the similarity noted, Moore's argument indicates the importance of reading his work as a process of exposing political ideology by drawing out the gap between political understanding and the 'real' world. Two essential points can be taken from this reading. The first is the flaw inherent in imposing an illumination coming *from within* as political system beyond the self. In *Watchmen*, Ozymandias' personal experience of history and the divine does not equate to a functional system for a whole world. The second is the relationship between illumination and conspiracy which attends the (flawed) imposition of individual revelation. Eric Voegelin

theorises a relationship between gnostic revelation and conspiratorial revolution, where the enacting of personal revelation requires secret groups to impose a new ideology on the populace (e.g. 2000: 211). When Ozymandias works in secret to impose his political vision on the world, his individual revelation and illumination – the stepping outside of ideology – becomes a new and equally flawed ideology. In *Watchmen,* Moore's political critique rests on the connections, and misapprehensions, between political planning and individual revelation.

Therefore, whilst ideology and revolution are core concerns of Moore's, his argument works toward a different end to that of Marxist critique. On its own terms, his statement suggests that the hidden complexity of the world poses a problem not only for the current state, but for all 'political systems'. Whilst the revelation of the true conditions of existence may offer revolutionary potential in classical Marxism, Moore's line of thought leads directly to the anti-Marxist politics of Eric Voegelin. Not only does the current state hide or disfigure reality, but so too does utopian thought in which change is brought about by remaking the world to a planned design. Although there are plenty of reasons not to, if we accept Moore's argument that the world is too complex to be accessible to human political thought, hubris emerges as the underlying error: in order for meaningful change to be effected, the world in all its complexity would need to be accessible to the individual proposing or describing a political system. Moore's logic is that if we accept the possibility of revolutionary change, we must accept that the politician-prophet proposing change either has supernatural powers of perception, or is also proposing a vision blind to the true complexity of the world.

In *Watchmen*, the narrative that describes Dr Manhattan and Ozymandias' battle of wills takes up Moore's critique from hubris. Manhattan, as the only truly supernatural character, makes clear that the rest of the characters, whose human-ness limits them to human perceptive faculties, work from a totally different (and incorrect) epistemology to his own. Ozymandias makes plans on the basis that history as revealed to him is superior to

the worldview of other political or heroic figureheads, ironically missing the message of Percy Shelley's poem about his chosen namesake. His program to bring 'an age of illumination' to the world carries the same note of revelation and salvation that Voegelin detects in twentieth-century political utopias (2000: 232). Unfortunately, history does not have the 'end' Ozymandias believes it does. Instead, as Dr Manhattan must inform him, 'nothing ever ends'. Placed in the background of the panel, with the revolving model of the solar system as the foreground, Ozymandias' final revelation is that the telos of history he perceived was nothing more than the end of a cycle (Moore and Gibbons 1987: XII:27).

The alternative to political and utopian planning, for Moore, is to create a state that is left unplanned after the failures of political planning are exposed: a true anarchy. Moore makes this program the centrepiece of *V for Vendetta*, where the process of transition from the planned fascist state to anarchy is considered at length. Anarchy as system (or as non-system) recurs throughout Moore's work, and Claire Sheridan has proposed that *Watchmen* should be understood in terms of Moore's reading of William Godwin. The point is valuable, demonstrating the alternative to Ozymandias' flawed vision and uniting Mary and Percy Shelley's tales of human hubris as precursors to Moore's text. Sheridan suggests reading Ozymandias as a representation of the failure of an immediate transition from repressive state to solipsistic personal judgement, rather than a gradual dismantling of state hegemony through the recruitment of freely associating individuals (2013: 182). A gradual process of illumination is preferable to the slaughter in Ozymandias' grand plan: revealing the true complexity of the world and following this revelation with a rupture that does not impose a new vision. Reading gnosis and political thought further into Sheridan's analysis, I would emphasise the importance of solipsism, rather than violence, as the flaw Moore targets in his work. In *Watchmen,* like in so many revolutions, violent destruction is applied as the method of imposing the new order rather than as the method of bringing about revelation. The difference between the terrorist V in *V for Vendetta* and Ozymandias is as much about planning (or a lack of it) as the actions themselves. V's violence is a method of

illumination: it reveals the limits of the planned state, whereas Ozymandias' actions aim to create it.

Sheridan's conclusion affects the generally understood relationship of the major works of the Dark Age, particularly as regards their politics and their interactions with their nineteenth-century precursors. Miller's model was to rupture ideology and transform the state, highlighting the state as post-villain hegemony. Moore extends the critique to its limit, suggesting all ideological rupture within these strictures leads only to power consolidated along different lines rather than the utopia that agents of revolution imagine. Read in this way, Moore not only constitutes a theoretical break with Miller from revolutionary politics to a philosophical and pragmatic anarchism, but also offers a critique of latent totalitarian tendencies in Miller's work before the implications of *Dark Knight* for the Dark Age had been fully understood. Like Ozymandias, Miller's Batman undergoes a revelation of his purpose and eventually plots to instigate a revolution, although the attendant conspiratorial process by which he will do so is hidden beyond the end of the narrative. Making Ozymandias' narrative the culmination of the process begun in *Dark Knight*, Moore tempers Miller's revolutionary politics by focusing on its gnostic and conspiratorial elements. Since gnosis and conspiracy are valuable critical lines of inquiry into the American Romance, I want to extend this argument by suggesting that Moore's reaction to Miller reintroduces elements from the nineteenth-century texts and their political climate that Miller's reading had emptied out.

The introduction and re-purposing of esoteric themes drawn from the American Romance into the Dark Age is an essential part of Moore's specific contribution to the moment. However, Moore's incorporation of Godwinian thought, and the continued introduction of esotericism into Miller's urban gothic framework by British writers, suggests an additional complexity to reading the Dark Age. The implication from this evidence is that there is something transatlantic, or at least not wholly American, about the way the works consider ideas of utopia and conspiracy, despite the theoretical and textual

links to American writing. As well as the obvious geographical rationale, there are two cultural factors contributing to this outcome. The first is the discourse of America as utopia, paralleling the new world on Earth of eschatological gnostic thought. The second is an additional element in the picture of esoteric practice in America: the pagan and folk magical traditions imported from the Old World. Arthur Versluis indicates there is a 'kind of Americanization' that took place in attitudes to esoterica in the New World, where esoteric and mystical practices were dropped by second and third-generation settlers in America in favour of the practicalities of their new lives and a growing rationalism (2001:184). With both these factors in play, British writers like Moore were well-positioned to import a lost sense of the mystical to American culture, as they recreated the initial journey of folk magic across the Atlantic to a new utopia.

The role of the transatlantic journey of magic in the construction of Romance is supported by textual evidence. As Jon Butler has noted, 'the origins of occult activity [in America] speak directly to the issue of international influence in American religious development' (1983: 59). The character of Chillingworth in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* exemplifies the esoteric culture of the moment, representing both belief in the new utopia and esoteric knowledge from the Old and New Worlds. Skilled physicians, Hawthorne notes, 'seldom […] partook of the religious zeal that brought other emigrants across the Atlantic' (1983: 220). Travelling from the Old World to the New, Chillingworth is both a providential gift for the settlers who reinforces their sense of divine destiny and a reminder of the dangers of secret knowledge, particularly that of the Indians with whom he trained. Furthermore, he has a vital narrative function within the Romance, as his existence offers the choice between a magical interpretation of the novel's action and a rational explanation. Did Chillingworth torture Dimmesdale with the 'secret poison of his malignity', or with secret herbal knowledge and his 'authorised interference, as a physician' (1983: 284)? For Hawthorne's contemporary audience, Chillingworth reminds America of its own buried

traditions steeped in magical and utopian thought: it is a community built from an imported utopian vision which developed in a world where occult danger lurked outside its borders.

The abandonment of Old World magical practices in America can be connected to an attendant feature of esoteric discourse which rises to prominence in the nineteenth century: conspiracy theory. Masonic principles and organisations were deeply embedded in the founding of the independent United States, leaving a legacy of esoteric symbols of Freemasonry in the new republic. In the years that followed, a rise in anti-Masonic sentiment and the foundation of rival secret societies meant that a preoccupation with Masonic ritual, and a fear of the secret society, took hold in American discourse (Versluis 2002: 51-2). Early America's attitudes to perceived conspiratorial threat were implicitly linked to fears of all forms of Old World magical practice and power – particularly fears of priestcraft and Catholicism, witchcraft, Masonic influence, and the Illuminati.[18] Levine proposes that these fears can be used to conceptualise antebellum conspiracy theory in contrast to the same discourse in the twentieth century: before the Civil War, the perpetuity of America is threatened by outside influences, whereas after Reconstruction the focus is on the challenge to the homogeneity of American culture from threats already inside the United States (2009: 233).

The power of the Anti-Masonic movement in the antebellum United States, alongside programs of utopian reform which required the creation of small, close-knit communities, meant that concern with secret societies had a place in public discourse. This discourse is reflected in the artistic production of the time. A rise in popular literature exploring contemporary fears of Catholic influence and the nature of Catholic convent life

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[18] There are vast distinctions, as well as significant overlaps, to be made between heterogenous traditions of folk magic, witchcraft, herbal medicine, travelling performances such as spirit-rapping, and ceremonial magic which aims at gnosis (what is properly referred to as esotericism). I do not mean to conflate these, other than by the similar reactions to them that created a climate of conspiratorial fear. Similarly, this study is not exhaustive and a number of other practices that travelled across the Atlantic could be mentioned, from the fear of the African folk magic brought into America through slavery to varieties of European esoterica with roots in Christian Gnosticism, such as Swedenborgianism.

has now largely been forgotten, but the evidence remains in works such as Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in A Convent* and Maria Monk's *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, or The Hidden Secrets of a Nun's Life in a Convent Exposed*. The concern is also reflected in the Romance's adoption of themes of fraternity, the secret society, and hidden or esoteric ritual. Somewhat paradoxically, the utopian sub-communities that inspired key works of the American Renaissance such *Walden* and *The Blithedale Romance* shared with the countersubversive movements of the period the goal of belonging 'to a purposive community that offered an order and *telos* perceived as missing from Jacksonian America'. At the same time, they replicated in their organisation 'the monastic communities vilified in anti-Catholic texts' (Levine 2009: 112-6). The eventual conversion of some Brook Farm inhabitants to Roman Catholicism in search of Fourier's utopian unityism validates the connections and suggests that Brook Farm, and other communities of the type, were both subversive and counter-subversive. Whilst the paradox itself is worth mentioning, it also colours a reading of the American Renaissance. Given the context to which he is responding, works like Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* should be read as texts in which the major theme is an examination of conspiracy and the insular community (Levine 2009: 132-3).

Hawthorne's focus on the relationship between magic and conspiracy that stretches back from his contemporary world to the first European settlements is replicated by the British writers who introduced the esoteric or the magical into 1980s America. The conspiracy plot of *Watchmen* is elucidated when placed within the transatlantic passage of esoterica and a climate where the practice of magic and the suspicion of magical practice is a regular occurrence. Ozymandias' conspiracy originates in the Old World, and draws its symbolism from Egyptology, a popular nineteenth-century esoteric discourse, yet it is perpetrated from inside the United States by an American. The purpose of the conspiracy is to threaten the perpetuity of America: because the USA is the dominant power in Moore's version of the Cold War, the alien attack must be in New York, rather than in the USSR, in

order to force America's hand. Yet, the end result is to undermine American homogeneity in order to preserve America in perpetuity, as the post-invasion 'Burgers and Borscht' restaurant indicates (XII:31-32). In effect, Moore overlays antebellum and twentieth-century fears of conspiratorial influence onto a plot that has its origins in American fears of Old World magic. Uniting two distinct strands of conspiracy thought, Moore uncovers a heritage of antebellum esoteric thinking that continues to exist in his contemporary America, and criticises the simplistic two-sided presentation of the Cold War that obscures the history of hidden knowledge in the United States.

The parallel between *Watchmen* and *Blithedale* can be developed by noting Moore's adoption of the same terms of reference for the superhero team, and the same naïve sense of promise the fraternity offers. Where Coverdale remarks on the 'blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood, at which we aimed' (Hawthorne 1983: 642), Dan Dreiberg evokes the same goal in his desire to be 'part of a brotherhood or something'. He continues: 'it would have been like joining the knights of the round tables; being part of a fellowship of legendary beings' (VII:8). The conception of the Crimebusters as a fellowship of legendary beings is, of course, flawed from its inception, but the binding nature of the secret society is felt throughout the novel. Dreiberg's resumption of the superhero program, years later, is referred to in identical terms of brotherhood: 'we have certain obligations to our fraternity' (VII:28). The group exactly resembles a conspiratorial society at this point, acting through obligation to other members of the group to undermine the rule of law (in this case, breaking Rorschach from jail).[19] The Crimebusters and the utopian society at Brook Farm share a common ideal of brotherhood and a political desire to improve the world by operating as a cadre outside of the law, even if they may not share sides on a political scale of left-right. Moore, again, is playing out Voegelin's theory that left and right is less

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[19] The same pattern is used by Moore in *From Hell*, where the coded phrase 'will no-one help the widow's son?' unites Masons to work against the law of the state and maintain their control of the government (2000: chap. 5, p.15).

important than utopian Gnosticism. For Voegelin, the 'brotherhood of autonomous persons' and 'the idea of a community of the spiritually perfect who can live together without institutional authority' are elements of revolutionary politics which originate in gnostic eschatology (2000: 180). Moore's fictional worlds without definable heroes or villains intimates that any apparent 'sides' are more politically, and spiritually, similar than they would first appear.

Moore replicates Levine's paradox of the simultaneously subversive and countersubversive group in the image of a superhero team who target corruption and conspiracy in pursuit of a utopian vision of a better society. *Watchmen* takes on the same problems as *Blithedale*, and paints the same pictures of an attempt at improving society that is flawed by insularity, by strong personalities with differing visions arrived at by hidden or speculative means, and by the misunderstanding of the outside world. The very nature of the society as secretive, replicating the problems it attempts to combat, becomes fundamental to its failure. Reading *Watchmen* in parallel to *Blithedale* then opens it to the critical analysis that sees it not as a text with a political program but, like *Blithedale*, an attempt to document the failings of utopian political programs. Moore states, on this point, that he was not suggesting that 'any dream of utopia is wrong', but instead wanted to show 'a world without heroes, without villains, since to my mind these are the two most dangerous fallacies which beset us both in the relatively unimportant world of fiction and the more important field of politics' (2012: 46). Firmly rejecting the simplicity of the binary superhero narrative, in line with his commitment to a revelation of complexity, Moore instead aims to show the ways in which this narrative creates utopian visions that become impossible to complete. The relationship between utopian revelation and conspiracy is fixed in Moore's texts, and originates in the discourses of early America.

At the conjunction of multiple groups with different aims, the truth of complexity beyond political reasoning is revealed. This line of thought has several notable proponents in twentieth-century political theory. Richard Hofstadter's 'The Paranoid Style in American

Politics' presents a premise that pre-empts Moore's text, arguing that the 'paranoid style' can be traced back to antebellum American culture. Hofstadter suggests several links between 1960s thought and the nineteenth century, particularly the Anti-Masonic, nativist and anti-Catholic movements in the United States and the exposure of the Illuminati in Europe (2008: 9-11). Drawing a connection between paranoid thinking and the fears of esoteric practice and conspiracy, Hofstadter states that the way in which the paranoid considers themselves to be at a turning point in history should be linked to religious apocalypticism, particularly 1830s Millerism: both share the belief that the enemy has a program with a specific timeframe for world domination. Both Hofstadter's and Moore's goals to challenge simplistic political ideology then begins to look like a revelation of a conspiracy or, more accurately, the revelation of a conspiracy to promulgate conspiracies. For Hofstadter and for Moore, multiple agents cannot easily be divided into a simplistic left-right political theory. Explaining why requires a demonstration of how these agents see the world through a simplistic political theory that has them believing they are surrounded by conspiratorial enemies, and how they form conspiratorial groups as a response.

Hofstadter's analysis effectively places anti-revolutionary theorists of the American Right (such as Voegelin) as the paranoids in opposition to the illuminated revolutionaries who seek to bring about a New World through the imposition of their political will. Somewhat paradoxically, the inherent logic of the two arguments denies this binary opposition. The claim of apocalypticism is also made by Voegelin of the revolutionary political threats he opposes, and he stakes out his own ground as rational political science in the same manner as many Marxist writers. In Voegelin, modern politics is an eschatological gnostic conspiracy; in the thought of latter-day twentieth-century Communist states, attempts at the New World of socialism are beset by a conspiracy of encroaching capitalism; in Hofstadter, it is the modern capitalist politicians of the United States who are paranoid, particularly toward the idea of communist infiltration. Somehow, all sides also have title over scientific rationalism to justify their position, and any idea of

two 'sides' is made complex to the point of illogicality, since all sides functionally replicate each other. As Versluis writes, the 'anti-esotericism of the left […] is almost a mirror reflection of the Inquisitorial tendency […] operating on the political right' (2006: 95).

The end point of the internal logic of this discourse is the simultaneous existence and non-existence of all conspiracies; rational argument collapses under its own contradictions into a sea of opposing plots. This is the world proposed by Shea and Wilson in *Illuminatus!*. The novel has retained some cache in esoteric circles, but is not usually considered in the same terms as the landmarks of paranoid 1960s postmodernism. However, it not only fits neatly among better-known works in terms of plot, style, and themes, but its success in countercultural circles sheds light on the work of many writers and artists that took up the same ideas. *Illuminatus!* begins with a looming Cold War nuclear apocalypse and a detective investigating a bombing. The detective follows a paranoid line of reasoning that 'there must be a relationship between fact number one and fact number two, even if no such relationship is visible yet' and is drawn into something much larger (Shea and Wilson 1998: 23). Eventually, the detective and a newspaper reporter for a political magazine are drawn into a counterculture where all the wildest conspiracies of the American political landscape are true and are fighting for global dominance. Any sense that there are definable positions is lost, yet all sides continue to define themselves as the only defence against a nebulous 'enemy'. In many ways, the novel is a key representation of the state of Cold War politics and discourse in the late 1960s.

Illuminatus! contains two themes that are vital to interpreting the majority of Moore's work: the illumination that brings about conspiracy, and the paranoid style of thought that sees conspiracy everywhere. These themes are embodied by Ozymandias and Rorschach, respectively. In Moore's version of the story, the illuminated Ozymandias has created a global conspiracy to fake an apocalypse and create the change he believes is necessary. Fighting one apocalypse with another, he races to complete his vision and avert the Cold War nuclear holocaust. Fittingly, an essential part of the novel is the complex

multiple timeframe as the clock counts down to midnight. However, the final stroke is not the apocalypse the reader was expecting. Rorschach, a combination of the paranoid outcast and the religious-apocalyptic prophet, follows his belief in connected facts to uncover Ozymandias' plot. The outcast who saw conspiracy everywhere was correct in perceiving his position at a turning point in history. His enemy was conspiring toward an apocalyptic goal, and to prevent it he must unite seemingly unconnected events as portents of destruction. His last act is a final act of revelation, the dissemination of his journal, which will undo the peace of nations.

As the plot of *Illuminatus!* develops, Shea and Wilson make creative (mis)readings of a number of high points of literary culture, in an act that prefigures the work of the Dark Age. Moore's desire to make '*Watchmen* the *Moby Dick* of comics' (Eno and Csawza 2006) is pre-empted by Shea and Wilson's attempt to situate Melville as their precursor. For Shea and Wilson, 'Melville was the most outrageous of the bunch […] a disciple of Hassan i Sabbah' (1998: 133). The suggestion that *Moby Dick* contains a set of references to a conspiracy that originates in eleventh-century Persia is the type of deliberately bizarre humour typical of *Illuminatus!*, but does in fact achieve their purpose. The incorporation of contemporary strands of esoteric and paranoid thought as narrative devices is a tool drawn directly from the Dark Romance. Ostensibly claiming their descendance from Melville as the author of an outrageous conspiracy novel, Shea and Wilson are taking a (deliberately) tangled web of nineteenth-century social phenomena full circle. In *Illuminatus!*, Shea and Wilson situate themselves as the cultural output reflective of the conspiracy theory of their moment, and invent a tradition in which Melville is their precursor. Moore's focus on gnosis, conspiracy and illumination, I suggest, performs the same act: just as Shea and Wilson did with Melville, or Miller did with Poe, Moore positions himself as the inheritor of the American tradition of gnostic Romance.

Conventions of Conspiracy

The 'simultaneously complicitous and subversive' (Levine 2009: 13) discourse of conspiracy in the Dark Romantic writers manifests itself as a set of aesthetic choices which evoke a cultural phenomenon, but do not align the writer with that phenomenon. Poe's writing, for example, would not work without esoterica as a prominent part of the contemporary cultural landscape, but analysis suggests he frequently makes mistakes in the details of the practices he fictionalises. Esoterica, for Poe, is an 'effect' and his mistakes indicate a lack of personal familiarity or belief (Versluis 2001: 79-80). Hawthorne and Melville follow the same pattern, utilising contemporary conspiracy symbolism despite their worldview often situating humanity at the centre of complex universe that resists conspiratorial interpretation. Hawthorne's description of the group at Blithedale Farm as 'A Knot of Dreamers' (1983: 644) is an illustrative example. The knot indicates a closed symbol, a conspiracy or secret society to be unpicked, but the appellation 'dreamers' questions the reason and influence of those who represent a conspiratorial mode of thought. In line with his own impressions of Brook Farm, in *Blithedale* Hawthorne undermines the program to change the world through small groups of utopian thinkers. Twentieth-century conspiracy fiction often walks the same path, and it is possible to detect similar conventions in the depictions of esoterica and conspiracy between the two moments.

Despite the constant interweaving of conspiracy symbolism throughout Moore and his precursors, all the texts considered are at pains to point out that the world is not actually controlled by the massive demonic forces they present. The rather more pressing problem is the chaotic universe itself. This universe appears all the more terrible when conspiracy or political theory is removed. Without clear sides and easy narratives, the real monster is a total lack of control. Rather than impute agency to forces outside of human control, the simultaneously complicit and subversive discourse of conspiracy highlights the fragility of human planning, secretive or otherwise, in contrast to the chaotic and uncaring universe.

Rorschach's grand revelation is that 'there is nothing else. Existence is random' (VI:26). If Moore's incorporation of conspiracy points toward a rethinking of antebellum attitudes, here his anarchism faces a new challenge: what happens when the world is revealed in all its complexity and ineffability? The answer lies in the revelations that form a recurring theme of *Watchmen*. In personal revelation, or, more accurately, in personal illumination, the relationship between conspiracy, politics, and gnostic illumination is most evident.

Rorschach's revelation takes place in front of a burning warehouse, illuminating him both metaphorically and physically. Just as it did in *Dark Knight,* a collapsing mansion indicates revelation. Moore reuses aesthetic patterns common to the Dark Age and to the Romance throughout the text. In another mansion scene, Laurie's revelatory moment triggers the collapse of Dr Manhattan's Martian glass palace (IV:25). Mal's revelation follows the same vocabulary as Rorschach's. He realises that 'in the end, it is simply a picture of empty meaningless blackness. We are alone. There is nothing else' (VI:26). Rorschach and Mal repeat a metaphorical pattern of light and dark: the setting of Rorschach's revelation contrasts the 'firelight' with the 'dark world', and the images of the blaze are replicated in the black-and-white Rorschach test. Two pages on, the test is the focus of Mal's revelation (VI:26-28). The same form is used in several nineteenth-century stories, typical of the shadows and moonlight of Romance. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, observing the 'swarthy whiteness' of Judge Pyncheon's face leads to the revelation that: 'there is no face! An infinite, inscrutable blackness has annihilated sight! Where is our universe? All crumbled away from us; and we, adrift in chaos' (Hawthorne 1983: 589). The human character, confronted with the ineffable sublime, can conceive of it only in the simplest terms of binary oppositions. But, for Rorschach at least, this revelation comes with the promise of a freedom from human ideology.

Moore is, of course, not suggesting Rorschach is a model to follow. The complication to his position, which Moore is careful to incorporate, is that the gnostic revelation of the chaos of existence drives attempts to impose order upon chaos. This

imposition directly restricts the personal freedom and endangers the lives of others – as Rorschach so often does. It is in the emptiness of the blackness that the ability to see, or enforce, a pattern upon the void is found. Rorschach is the emblem of this revelation: combining black and white as symbol, his role as superhero, detective, and conspiracy thinker is brought about by his revelation that 'existence has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it too long' (VI:26). He shares this trait with Ozymandias, his opposite number, who goes through his own illumination in a typically Moore-ian fashion, but resolves to control the chaos of existence rather than accept it. Believing he is able to divine and affect human history, Ozymandias' goal is to bring 'an age of illumination to a benighted world' (XI:8). If Ozymandias' plan is the implementation of a large-scale gnostic illumination which will resolve dispute and usher in a New Age, this comes at a significant human cost, is not guaranteed any success, and involves a variety of morally questionable and underhand plots. Moore's point, as always, is to undermine every position of authority, even the authority gained through the method he uses as critique.

Long before Voegelin's critique of gnostic illumination, Hawthorne had made clear that the process towards societal illumination is flawed if secret societies are required to implement this illumination. In *Blithedale*, Silas Foster observes that 'the blaze of brushwood will only last a minute or two longer' and Coverdale's narratorial voice comments that: 'whether he meant to insinuate that our moral illumination would have as brief a term, I cannot say' (Hawthorne 1983: 654). At the end of *Watchmen*, Rorschach's last act is to transmit his knowledge of the conspiracy to the world, to reveal the plot. He is aware this will lead to his death. Suggesting he will be 'one more body amongst foundations', Rorschach metaphorizes Ozymandias' new state as a large building (XII:24). Although the final revelation is left tantalisingly beyond the end of the plot, Moore's characterisation of the new world as a mansion suggests that Rorschach will ultimately be successful: the mansion, after all, collapses at the point of revelation. Ozymandias' 'age of illumination' will be as brief as Blithedale's, since he fails to perceive what Coverdale

already knew about the goal of 'moral illumination' – there is much human cost and no guarantee of success.

When *Watchmen* is read with reference to nineteenth-century texts, the critical implication is clear: Veidt's utopia, like the House of Seven Gables, or the House of Usher, cannot survive when bodies are buried beneath it. Ozymandias' age of illumination is flawed *because* of the conspiratorial means that are required to bring it about. The end-goal of Moore's use of esotericism is to emphasise that political power originates in the act of revelation, of understanding what lies beneath the visible. At the same time, it is also from this position that power becomes flawed. Illumination tends to lead toward monomania and an instinct for control: the gnosis of Rorschach and Ozymandias is also the gnosis of Ahab, who exhorts others to 'strike through the mask' of the world (Melville 1988: 164). Ahab's speech also verifies the Melville-Shea and Wilson-Moore pattern. His next question asks 'how can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall'? (Melville 1988: 164). In *Illuminatus!*, there is a recurring joke on the foolishness of the state's arrests of countercultural activists: the illuminated prisoner can escape a prison cell by simply going through the wall (Shea and Wilson 1998: 63, 65). In each text, illumination is the method of fighting back against an oppressive authority. Unfortunately, it also has the potential to become a new method of imprisonment.

The limit Moore creates for his critique is that illumination is not a political program in of itself, but merely a way of unveiling a worldview obscured by the dialectical discourse of the superhero. Underneath the mask, underneath the appearance of order, is the revelation of the terrible chaos of the universe. Perceiving this gnostic revelation is dangerous in itself, but using it as a basis for political machination is even more dangerous. To combat those who want to turn their vision into power, the absurd complexity of the human world beyond the appearance of 'sides' must be revealed, rather than obscured. Moore's vision of a world exposed is, essentially, summed up by the newspaper seller.

After reading the newspapers every day, at one point he remarks that 'all we see is what's on the surface. I bet there's all kinda stuff we never notice.' (V:17).

A Transatlantic Perspective

Moore's 1980s comics, in my reading, comprise an aesthetic and narrative play with darkness and light in the vein of the American Romance. The Dark Age is illuminated by gnosis, but this revelation is darkened by both the ontology it exposes and the political outcomes it entails. Moore's texts indicate that practices of gnosis and illumination are often tainted by conspiracy: the initiatory secret society generally has a specific program for achieving illumination, yet this underhanded gnostic practice is dangerous when combined with a will-to-power. At the same time, the fears of conspiracy in the cultural context for Romantic considerations of illumination are linked to the fear of infiltration by outsiders. An antebellum context that conflates a variety of conspiratorial threats is remade in the Dark Age as British writers introduce esoteric themes to the superhero narrative.

In this section, I will develop an argument that relates the British contribution to the Dark Age to its esoteric content by positing the transatlantic nature of Moore's writing as a major part of his aesthetics of illumination. Both Melville, in Ahab, and Moore, in the newspaper-seller, suggest illumination as an act of seeing from the outside or beneath the surface of things. Moore's politics and his development of the superhero narrative both depend on this aesthetic. The act of seeing beyond, or beneath, becomes the way in which a positive gnosis can be developed, whilst Moore's observational distance in writing an American superhero comic is the source of his ability to illuminate issues at the heart of the form. Illumination as a method of stepping outside of ideology is transferred onto a concern with perspective – point of view. As Frank Miller noted about *Watchmen*, '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' (Sharrett 1991: 45).

Miller does not specify what it is in *Watchmen* that constitutes a 'European point of view', but the relationship between illumination and perspective offers one possibility: Moore's 'European' reading from a distance, displaced from the point of origin, means that assumptions about character or narrative can be challenged in a way not possible for writers determined by their position within American culture. The implication for the critic is that the focus on perception and illumination in *Watchmen* is inherently part of its transatlantic qualities. Moore's work is placed within the theoretical paradigm that emphasises the need to both uncover the transatlantic viewpoint in canonical American literature and to read American culture from a transatlantic perspective, paying attention to the formulations of America that occur outside its geographical borders. By analysing the concern with perspective, and viewing from a distance, I want to suggest that Moore, as reader and writer of American literature, positioned himself within this framework before it had been theoretically formulated as part of literary scholarship.

As I have noted above, Moore's introduction to the collected edition of Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* praises the text in ways that say much more about Moore's own concerns for the superhero comic. Writing in support of a book where the primary concern is a reimagining of American identity, Moore begins by focusing on the increasingly globalised world 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 that follow this opening argument make little reference to a global perspective

within *Dark Knight* – he instead goes on to discuss the contemporary American situation, Clint Eastwood, Davy Crockett, and the Bernie Goetz case. Looking back on Moore's piece, there is more than a touch of self-aggrandisation present, and he perhaps damns Miller with faint praise (the same, of course, might well be read into Miller's suggestion of a 'European point of view' for Moore's work). Moore argues that the primary problem for the superhero comic is the pressing need for a new global vision, but is perhaps already looking beyond Miller's work, and to his own, as the place where that problem has been solved.

Moore's call for new heroes and perspectives might seem naïve or unfair today, when new studies suggest the commingling of national traditions in comics had occurred for a long time before he 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 American superhero traditions in other countries (Little 2010: 140). Miller's transpacific influences are most obvious in his work on *Ronin*, *Daredevil* and *Wolverine*, yet Moore makes no mention of this in his introduction, focusing instead on Miller's subversion of the tradition of the American hero. It is, perhaps, a little unfair to Moore to comment on the fact he does not discuss a broader trend or Miller's other comics in his short introduction to a particular work. On the other hand, Moore's suggestion that 'we see more of the world' is openly at odds with the rest of his introduction, which shrinks 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 Miller's undermining of the American tradition seems to re-inscribe that tradition in the act of emphasising it as a point of departure.

At the time of Moore's writing, a generation of British writers were already making use of the American tradition as a point of departure. Critically responding to the America of the American superhero comic was one of their core concerns during the late 1970s and

early 1980s, notably evident in *2000 AD's* most popular series – Judge Dredd. In the case of Marvel UK, where Moore had worked 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). 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' (2010: xiii). I would suggest that placing Moore within this changing context exposes the productive tensions in his writing between the desire for a transnational superhero comic and the American model he is following. To resolve this tension, Moore's approach borrowed from and replicated the national traditions put to use by Miller, but attempted to subvert their insular exceptionalism. Moore, at the forefront of the British Invasion, combines the critical outlook of the British comics and their awareness of the role of Europe in shaping American self-conception with an aesthetic of gnosis and esoterica. The outcome is a comic that replicates the nineteenth-century American gothic focus on perspective, gnosis, and the Old World of Europe.

In the Dark Romance, a concern with physical, temporal and geographical perspective is common. The method for Moore to be able to perceive society and portray it accurately is outlined in *The House of the Seven Gables*. There, Hawthorne's guidance for viewing a political procession notes a centre 'black with mystery' and harks back to dangers lurking underneath the gnostic revelation of the black heart of the universe:

> In order to become majestic, it should be viewed from some vantage-
> point, as it rolls its slow and long array through the centre of a wide plain
> […] for then, by its remoteness, it melts all the petty personalities, of
> which it is made up, into one broad mass of existence […]. But, on the
> other hand, if an impressible person, standing alone over the brink of one
> of these processions, should behold it, not in its atoms, but in its

aggregate,--as a mighty river of life, massive in its tide, and black with
mystery, and, out of its depths, calling to the kindred depth within him,--
then the contiguity would add to the effect. It might so fascinate him that
he would hardly be restrained from plunging into the surging stream of
human sympathies. (Hawthorne 1983: 494)

By viewing from a distance, the procession can be studied holistically and its
inherent sublimity brought out. The vantage point, here literally a height, is the starting
point for understanding. Like Ozymandias' gnostic method of viewing multiple sources
simultaneously, from a distance many specifics become one agglomerate whole. Moore
replicates Hawthorne's program throughout *Watchmen*. From the book's opening page,
viewing from a height is the primary means of gaining information. As Gibbons' depiction
of the converging lines down a skyscraper implies, perspective is essential (Moore and
Gibbons 1987: I:1). When the image of the skyscraper recurs on page 5, the panel layout
creates two reading paths, one in space (vertical) and one in time (horizontal), indicating
the multiple viewpoints and perspectives that Moore incorporates. Perspective now takes
four dimensions: geographical location, height, and time (Moore and Gibbons 1987: I:5).
Dr Manhattan functions as the ultimate viewer in this model of a perspective. Viewing time
in much the same way as the other superheroes view space, he is able to observe the earth
with a perspective other characters cannot achieve. His interplanetary and omnitemporal
perspective effectively reiterates Hawthorne's act of viewing from a height:

The world is so full of people, so crowded with these miracles that they
become commonplace and we forget… I forget. We gaze continually at
the world and it grows dull in our perceptions. Yet seen from another's
vantage point, as if new, it may still take the breath away. (IX:27)

In Hawthorne and in Moore, viewing from a height invigorates the viewer's
perception of humanity. Moore also retains the cautionary note at the end of Hawthorne's

guidance. The experience of viewing from a height provokes Manhattan's final return to Earth, to plunge again into human affairs, just as Hawthorne cautions against the suicidal leap into human sympathies. The Comedian's final plunge is similarly occasioned by his gaining a (different) insight from a high vantage point (II:22), and it is a moment of illumination which drives Ozymandias to his scheme for apocalyptic change. Although Hawthorne's Clifford is ultimately prevented from taking the plunge, here are several comparable figures confined to their high towers, discovering a viewpoint which compels them to dive back toward humanity. The result, unfortunately, will not be as they hoped during their vision. The unwise decision to jump would be attributed to madness rather than illumination in Hawthorne's America, and the Comedian's unexplained death is the parallel form in Moore. The message is clear: illumination through height is powerful, but like all gnosis there is an attendant risk.

Ozymandias, again, is the most obvious vehicle for Moore's commitment to outlining the risks of gnostic practice. Like Manhattan, he has a perspective at a remove from current events. Ozymandias is able to synthesise and consider multiple viewpoints in his method of reading media, characterised as part of the same method of gaining perspective. During a moment of linguistic play on the idea of 'observation', Ozymandias notes that 'an emergent worldview becomes gradually discernible' when he views multiple media sources. 'Worldview', like 'observation', is given the double-meaning that makes physical perception and insight contiguous (XI:1). Importantly, Ozymandias believes these insights are predictive, and he bases his future business plans on them. At the same time, he acknowledges that the method has a precursor 'in the shamanistic tradition of divining randomly scattered goat innards' (XI:2). The comment is the clearest indication in *Watchmen* of Moore's later career path, which has focused with increasing detail on a literature of magical, shamanistic and gnostic practice. Just as Moore's own career has a transatlantic frame, the literary origins of Ozymandias as diviner indicate the importance of travel and 'worldview' in gnostic practice.

As did Hawthorne, Melville also anticipates Moore's interest in viewing position. In *Moby Dick,* Melville suggests that 'the earliest standers of mast-heads were the old Egyptians' (1988: 154). His assertion describes a relationship between the ability to foresee or see below the surface and an act of physical removal, distance or being raised to a height. He explains that the argument is based on 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' (155). The position of lookout, the first to perceive and descry danger, effectively predicting the future of the ship and determining its course, is described by Melville as originating in Egypt well before Moore accords the same position and point of origin to Ozymandias. The similarity is reinforced by Ozymandias' discussion of his own abilities of perception. 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' (XI:21). Moore's use of 'vista' in particular suggests Ozymandias' own tendency to view vision and perception as one and the same, placing him in the tradition Melville establishes of Egyptian mast-head standers. Sharing his interest in perspective with both Hawthorne and Melville, Moore appears to be a direct inheritor of a Dark Romantic theme.

Unsurprisingly, given his background, Melville is not uncomplimentary of the mast-head stander. Poe takes a more critical slant. Ozymandias' act of composing a viewpoint from disparate, mixed media sources is directly related to the detective's process of construction through newspaper accounts described above. The connection between the detective and viewpoint is alluded to by Poe in his well-known 'game of puzzles […] which is played upon a map'. The game, described by Dupin in 'The Purloined Letter', requires two players to select 'any word […] on the motley and perplexed surface of the chart'. Whilst the novice tends to choose small words, 'the adept selects such words as stretch […] from one end of the chart to the other'. Connecting this choice to the detective

method, Poe suggests that the 'physical oversight' which leads to the large letters being the better choice 'is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed these considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident' (Poe 1984: 694). Once again, stepping back and viewing from a distance is the best method for accurate understanding.

There is a note of excessive pride in Dupin's admonishment of poor players of the game, and the leap from viewing ability to intellectual ability mirrors Dr Manhattan's cold criticism of humanity's small concerns. Although Poe does not allow Dupin to fall victim to his own hubris, Moore's point relies on Ozymandias (as narrative foil to Dr Manhattan) making this mistake. Two panels after his observation on the shamanic method, Ozymandias sees Rorschach and Nite Owl II approaching and states that 'their pursuit leads them into moral and intellectual regions […] uncharted and devoid of landmark'. Ozymandias' words are a direct repetition of Dupin's metaphor of the map, with the hubris set to maximum. In full supervillain mode, he continues: 'let's hope they don't become too reckless and overstep themselves. Let's hope they know where to stop' (XI:2). The 'moral inapprehension' and overstepping here is all Ozymandias' own, his esoteric gnosis leading him toward the apocalyptic plan or, as Rorschach suggests, the 'heart of darkness' (XI:3).

The blurring of Ozymandias' hero/villain status indicates the importance of Moore's own position in relation to the superhero comics upon which *Watchmen* builds. As Ozymandias' hubris and commitment to his own gnostic eschatology is gradually revealed, the moral centre of the character shifts for the reader. The shift demonstrates that he should be judged by his actions of attempting to impose his will on the world, rather than by an identification of his character as 'good or 'evil'. Beginning as the hero and becoming the villain, Ozymandias reveals to the reader the flaws inherent in the two-sided hero-villain narrative as he plans to initiate a new utopia through violence. Moore's criticism of the hero-villain narrative and his criticism of political planning are both generated from the legacy of connection to the Old World. Ozymandias' gnosis and his hubris, his 'good' and

'evil', are born in the same moment in Egypt. This argument highlights Moore's 'British flavour': it is only the outside observer that gains the necessary perspective to foresee, but this does not guarantee their course of action to be the best. It follows that Miller would identify this aspect of Moore's work as 'European' or 'British', since the immediate impact of this worldview is to undermine the heroic American exceptionalism implicit in Miller's work. Miller sought a break from the Old World to create a new America – this was both the goal of his Batman and the purpose of his work within comics. Moore's version of the American Romance denies this action as part of his rediscovery of transatlantic connections.

With greater perspective, one can see the ongoing legacy of the Old World that determines the New World. Recovering this viewpoint challenges the idea of a new utopia. The connection between perspective and the transatlantic origins of Moore's work therefore occurs by the way of the discourses on eschatology and utopia that have historically formed a large part of the image of the New World of America in Europe. Viola Sachs' investigation of gnosis in the American Romance is a precursor to the type of critical thinking being suggested here. Sachs suggests that the study of sacred meaning 'offers a key to the understanding of American writings in which the myth of America, i.e., the myth of the creation of a new world or re-creation of the world, constitutes, overtly or not, the underlying theme' (1980: 142). While it has valuable applications when comparing writers like Melville and Moore, the complex esoteric hermeneutics of Sachs' work initially resulted in a cautious approach from transatlantic American studies (Elliot 2007: 6-7). A more applicable method arose over a decade later when Paul Giles' *Virtual Americas*, now an essential text for the consideration of transatlantic American literature, theorised a link between the transatlantic viewpoint, esotericism, and the nineteenth-century American Romance.

In his book, Giles links major American writers by their conspiratorial outlook. He begins with the accepted wisdom that 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'. Giles' modification to this view suggests 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). The intimation that Pynchon's postmodern conspiracy is connected to a system of nineteenth-century esoteric knowledge is worth noting, as is Giles' argument that a fuller understanding of the conception of America in American literature requires a return to the Old World. The connection between conspiracy thought and perspective – that is, seeking to understand the order beneath the New World by returning to the Old – chimes with both the transatlantic history of esoterica and the impact of 1960s postmodernism on Moore's work.

Following this line of thought, it is possible to read Moore as adapting a 'distinctly American vision' in a similar way as Pynchon and Melville before him. He is describing the New World in the context of the Old World, with the additional fact of coming from this Old World, in order to see beneath what is visible. As with Melville, the comparison between Moore and Pynchon is borne out by textual evidence: Pynchon is a writer Moore acknowledges as an influence, and Pynchon's *V* is given a prominent place in the library of banned books in *V for Vendetta* (Moore 2005: 64). With clear textual and paratextual evidence of a relationship of influence between Pynchon and Moore, the 'European' flavour Frank Miller posits is more accurately a 'transatlantic' flavour that follows Giles' particular use of the term (Miller, of course, did not have the advantage of this theoretical development). Like Pynchon's, Moore's America is contingent upon the Old World for its definition. Moreover, Moore's conspiratorial focus is itself a European flavour, traceable to a line of writers of conspiracy fiction that is necessarily transatlantic. This reading develops the critique of Ozymandias' flawed 'age of illumination', becoming a critique of the view of America as a utopian or eschatological New World. This belief is undermined if the true 'order' beneath things is uncovered by returning to a transatlantic history.

In this reading, Ozymandias' status as utopian figurehead is challenged by his role as a hero who finds validation in the Old World of Greek and Egyptian history and myth. The return to the Old World in Pynchon is necessary to better understand an American conspiracy; not, as Ozymandias seeks, to create one. Moore's depiction of Ozymandias' history and revelation has a direct precursor in Melville, whom Giles points out 'uproot[s] American heroes from their familiar territory and displace[s] them into the world of the Levant' in *Clarel* (2002: 77). The journey to the religious Old World, whether this is Egyptian or Abrahamic, offers the historical perspective needed to make sense of the present situation, but this is gained through geographical movement. Giles develops his argument by pointing out that both *Clarel* and *The Marble Faun* have American intellectuals 'transplanted to the global epicentre of a world religion […] so their Puritan consciousness can be examined within a larger comparative perspective' (2002: 80). Whether it is for religious insight or to try and solve a mystery, the act of displacement and the attendant defamiliarization may bring clarity, but does not bring mastery. If anything, in *Clarel*, *V*, or *The Marble Faun* the protagonists end knowing less about the world than when they began the narrative. Ozymandias, again missing the intimation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, ends his journey with a method for taking over the world.

As a writer, Moore's location means he is continually working from the comparative perspective that Melville and Hawthorne acquire from their transatlantic journeys. It should be no surprise, then, that Ozymandias' failure to acquire true perspective from his journey reads somewhat like a critique of Miller's resolutely American Batman. Moore's analysis of the religious consciousness of the superhero emphasises that this consciousness is derived from a set of Old World practices which are found by journeying to their point of origin. In both *Clarel* and *Watchmen*, there is a collocation of place and time that suggests a historical past has a geographical location. This location must be sought in order to better understand the present. The comparative perspective brought by this journey then allows a clearer vision of the New World, a vision

which turns away from exceptionalism to gain the bigger picture. Batman, at the end of *Dark Knight*, has no sense of this perspective – the internal dialectic of the text considers only the United States, and which hero can be the most American. Without perspective, his impetus to build anew is flawed. Giles suggests 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' (2002: 20). We could add here that this residual narrative of nationalism becomes, for Moore, the first barrier which must be broken in order for a holistic vision to be gained.

Reading the two writers side-by-side, is becomes apparent that the transatlantic framework Giles exposed in Melville can also be found in Moore. Parallel analysis not only emphasises a relationship of influence between the two writers, but demonstrates a connection in the geo-cultural orientation of their texts. It appears, in fact, that Moore and the British Invasion comics writers pre-empt Giles' theoretical advancements as they seek to move beyond the attitude toward comics that pervaded Anglophone culture at the time. Where Giles laments that discussion 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: 263-64) – this is demonstrably not the case for Moore, Morrison, Gaiman and others of the British Invasion. Instead, their work indicates a program to cast a critical eye on this area of popular culture, to challenge its assumptions and foundations. I do not wish to deny there is a very different romanticising of America in these writers, but their infatuation is with the already-transatlantic American Romance, from which they draw so much inspiration. Their fascination with the gothic, haunted model of American literature aided these writers in importing a new vision of America, and of American comics, to a market which itself had become transnational without having its assumptions of nationalism and patriotism challenged. In this way, comics in the 1980s began to offer the feedback loop which Giles later theorised.

Despite the strength of Moore's text and argument, shot through with literary allusions and references that bolster its claim to cultural legitimacy, the novel remains haunted by the spectre of political action. At the close of the novel, the fate of Ozymandias' new world is under threat, but undecided; the crisis in global politics at the end of the Cold War has been entwined with the crisis of the American superhero, but neither have been solved. Moore's goal in *Watchmen* is not easy, and his politics tends towards a stasis embodied by his ambiguous ending. Moore has challenged American superhero comics by seeking out a greater perspective and critiquing an insular American culture that tended to 'virtualise' America as a singular or exceptional. At the same time, his text is filled with exhortations to avoid the disastrous plunge back into human affairs after perspective has been gained: from such a global or universal perspective, exceptionalism is obviously flawed, but very little seems to matter. Even after returning to Earth, Dr Manhattan is clear that 'nothing ever ends'. Whilst Moore's virtual America denies an 'America' that consciously removes its links to the Old World, in the same move it challenges the gnostic impulse to build a New World. If even Ozymandias' new transatlantic homogeneity is threatened by the means used to create it, what world is possible?

Similarly, Moore brings the transatlantic history of conspiracy and gnostic practice that can be found in the antebellum American Romance back to the superhero comic. Miller had emptied out this content, but Moore finds a critique that was always present in this moment: the 'dark' response to utopianism that sought to undermine revolutionary idealism by playing on contemporary fears of conspiracy and esoterica. Building a superhero story that stresses the esoteric and the hidden, Moore illuminates or reveals the political assumptions behind the genre and the worldview it promulgates. However, there is little left as a counter-proposal. Writing to promote personal illumination and anarchism, yet continually reinforcing the pitfalls that result from this illumination, Moore becomes something like the anti-Marx: the prophet unwilling to have anyone act on his prophecy, lest they create a worse future. In the end, Moore positions himself akin to Hawthorne's

narrator in 'Sights from a Steeple'. High above the earth, the narrator states: 'over it am I, a watchman, all-heeding and unheeded' (Hawthorne 1982: 43). At the end of the first phase of what would come to be called the Dark Age, it appeared to some, and not least to himself, that Moore had effectively written the end of the superhero.

'Into that other world': *Arkham Asylum*

Introduction: The Dialectics of Batman

In the years following the publication of *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, the ripples of the Dark Age that had been set off by Miller and the first wave of the British Invasion were noticeable in the wider industry. Todd McFarlane's detailed art had brought an expressionistic, dark sensibility to brightly coloured heroes such as Spider-Man, and the revival or debut of series based on violent vigilantes and gothic or occult themes – such as *The Punisher* and *Hellblazer* – suggested a sea change in the landscape of comics content. In this milieu, 1989 was a year of some significance for the Dark Age. Three years after the *annus mirabilis* of 1986, several works were released whose critical and financial impact validated the effort to capitalise on these early changes. In June 1989, Tim Burton's *Batman* was released in cinemas. A commercial success that built on the groundwork of *Dark Knight* and Moore's *The Killing Joke*, the film marked a shift in tone and altered the on-screen Batman from the camp 1960s version to a noticeably gothic urban fantasy. Four months later, it was followed by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Batman: Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, a 'deliberately elliptical […] un-American' text that achieved unprecedented sales for a superhero graphic novel (Morrison 2012: 225-27). The tide had turned towards the dark superhero.

If any work should be singled out as the representative for the aesthetics of the Dark Age, it is *Arkham Asylum.* That designation, unfortunately, is not necessarily praiseworthy. Marc Singer begins his study of the work by noting that 'comic book fans and creators alike regard *Arkham Asylum* as one of the worst excesses of the 1980s'. There is some truth to this statement – it is hard to deny that the text is 'a grandiose work that takes itself far

too seriously, confusing artistic maturity with arcane symbolism, sexual panic, and brutal violence' (Singer 2006: 269). As Morrison's doubling of the term in the title points out, the work maximises the *serious* (i.e. violent, dark, 'gritty') qualities of the Dark Age Batman to the point where they become paradoxically absurd, removing any possibility of self-awareness, irony or light-heartedness from the superhero narrative.[20] Whilst this is easy to interpret as a flaw in the work, it is worth considering that the success of the book, both at the time of publication and in its critical legacy, relied on these same characteristics. Morrison is willing to admit the concurrent attention given to the Batman film may have had an impact on sales of *Arkham Asylum* and, taking a similar approach, the book's commercial achievement is not hard to explain (Morrison and McKean 2004: 51).[21] The excesses of violence and esoterica, art that was equal parts gothic and expressionist, and the psychologically damaged Batman are elements that may appear trite or overworked today, yet at the time they encapsulated the new movement and made Morrison one of the biggest names in superhero comics.

Revisiting the work in the context of the Dark Age, it is clear that *Arkham Asylum* borrowed and indeed maximised many of the significant elements of the style inaugurated by Miller and Moore. At the same time, as was the case in the comparison between Moore and Miller, there are just as many points of difference that mark a change in the approach to the superhero, and these ensure that the work retains critical relevance. Although pushing certain traits of the Dark Age Batman to a point of absurdity has led to accusations that

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[20] The subtitle of the text is taken from Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going'. At first, this fact appears to rescue Morrison from critical analysis of the use of the term *serious* by displacing his responsibility for it. However, Morrison's excerpting of the phrase not only removes any of the critical undertones of the term from Larkin's own use, it also points to the oddity of *Arkham Asylum's* seriousness within the realm of post-modern irony. The playfulness that the appropriation of Larkin to a 1980s superhero comic might carry is lost in Morrison's emphasis on the *serious* as an opposition to either the well-known camp or other forms of ironic Batman narrative.

[21] As others have noted (see Singer 2006), the lack of pagination in *Arkham Asylum* in all published editions makes citation with page numbers impossible. In this chapter, quotations without pagination are from the text of the comic. Quotations from the script and its annotations that appear in the 15th Anniversary Edition follow the handwritten page numbers at the top of the script.

Morrison was too pretentious or that he mishandled the character (Singer 2006), in his notes to the 15th Anniversary Edition of the text he writes that 'the repressed, armoured, uncertain and sexually frozen man in ARKHAM ASYLUM was intended as a critique of the 80s interpretation of Batman as violent, driven and borderline psychopathic' (2004: 5). The goal of maximising the negative traits of the Batman is that 'having been through this reversal of all his normal valencies, 80s Batman, purified and purged of negative elements, is returned to Gotham City to become the super-confident, zen warrior of my subsequent JLA stories' (2004: 66).

Morrison's words deserve to be given some credence, despite the fact they appear to be an attempt at retrospective absolution written well after the work's publication and reception. His intent, as he suggests it, was to create a space in which the Batman could be exposed to the most egregious excesses of the innovations of the Dark Age. What looks at first to be Morrison borrowing from the early Dark Age, and over-reaching himself in the process, is an attempt to examine the limits of Moore's and Miller's critiques of the superhero comic. By his account, he was trying to redeem the comic from what was felt to be a particularly critical or destructive method of 'saving' it. Current critical opinion confirms that there is good reason to take Morrison's comments as a starting point for reading *Arkham Asylum*. Chris Murray notes that Morrison 'wants to make superhero comics better, and to show that as a metaphor [superheroes] can be positive expressions of human potential, not the psychopaths and fascists Moore and Frank Miller portray' (2010: 41), and Mark Williams reads *Arkham Asylum* as a way of moving the superhero narrative forward, and avoiding 'cultural stasis' (2015: 221).

Neatly, and perhaps unwittingly, the phrasing of Morrison's defence provides the tools necessary to examine his justifications, and the development of the Dark Age that the text attempts. Morrison, in his own words, is effecting a 'critique' of Batman by reversing his 'valencies' and returning him to the world in a changed form. These keywords are illuminating: 'critique' implies a theoretical evaluation and a moving forward of the

character, whilst 'valencies' ties this idea to opposing poles within the character that somehow can be, or have been, switched. In this conception, the totality of Batman (the form in which Batman existed before Frank Miller and *The Dark Knight Returns*) must have contained inherently oppositional forces or poles between which the character can move, and the movement between these poles creates a temporal and productive relation. This conclusion is easily supported: in Miller and Moore's terms these poles are essentially the hero and psychopath, and they choose to emphasise one pole in order to move the character forward. Miller and Moore channelled a set of elements or qualities of Batman to create a negative vision – what Morrison refers to as the '80s interpretation of Batman'. Morrison then intends to exhaust this interpretation in his critique in order to renew Batman, returning him to something that is simultaneously an advancement of the character and something more resembling the starting position.

The path of development for the character, as Morrison conceives it, is therefore fundamentally dialectical: a negation of a negation generating (temporal) development. Reading *Dark Knight* and then *Arkham Asylum*, it appears that Morrison has imbibed the gothic dialectic implicit in Miller's text and regurgitated it in terms of 'valencies' and 'negative elements'. His work is a deliberate attempt to advance an argument to a point of reversal, in what Fredric Jameson describes in *Valences of the Dialectic* as the 'dialectical shock': 'we follow the process whereby we are led to a critical and negative position [Miller], then brutally canceled in a second moment to which we are less likely to lend our absolute credence' (Jameson 2009: 56). If the original project of the Dark Age to expose the 'reality' of the Batman character was convincing, the exposure is cancelled as the Batman is revealed as having been fictional the entire time, and not subject to political and social readings.

To phrase this a different way, Morrison's work makes Batman *always-already unreal*. The attempt of the early Dark Age to constitute a fictional world that was bounded by literary history and political discourse whilst also drawing out the negative interpretation

of the superhero is circumscribed by the exposure of the inherent opposition between the literary (fiction) and the political (reality). Moore's Rorschach or Miller's Batman are only destined to die at the hands of the power structures they oppose if the world is real and follows the rules we would expect. Batman can be rescued if the fictional nature of his world is reinforced. Morrison returns to this position, with a new understanding of the concept: the text, he writes, was intended as 'a story not of the real world' (2012: 225). Morrison's move is then the third stage in the three-stage process Jameson outlines for the dialectic. In Jameson's terms, the dialectic proceeds as: 'stupid first impression as the appearance; ingenious correction in the name of some underlying reality or "essence"; but finally, after all, a return to the reality of the appearance' (Jameson 2009: 57). If Miller and Moore 'corrected' the 'stupid' superheroes that were a hangover of the era of the Comics Code, in the late Dark Age our attention is (re)turned to the reality of the appearance, or of the not-real world.

The exhaustion by doubling of the *serious* qualities of the Dark Age Batman now presents itself as proof of this shift. Rather than a clumsy out-of-context quotation, the repetition of 'serious' in the work's subtitle starts to look like a deliberate and productive effort to create absurdity from seriousness. Similarly, a 'return to the reality of the appearance' corresponds to the biographical fact that Morrison moved from Vertigo-type titles to a long period of writing for mainstream comics, including time on *Superman* and *New X-Men*. Morrison's career is directly in opposition to Miller's and Moore's paths, which tended (for the most part) towards more experimental and non-superhero comics following their work for DC. It is easy to interpret Miller's and Moore's career choices as a disaffection with the tenets of mainstream superhero fiction that continued to exist after their attempt at radical change. Morrison saw no such issue, continuing to take 'well-paid superhero projects at DC [with] no intention of approaching them as [...] the dying coals of the house that Moore Burned Down' (Morrison 2012: 230)

Most importantly, analysis of Morrison's writing in the 1980s bears out the idea of his work as an attempt to focus on fiction, and particularly the fiction of the superhero, rather than the world outside the text. In fact, the most significant difference between *Arkham Asylum* and its Dark Age precursors is the almost complete absence of the contemporary United States as context. In the main, the action of the text is inside the asylum, walled off the outside world, and in Morrison's terms both physically and symbolically 'interior' (Morrison 2012: 225). The politics of the early Dark Age – where Moore and Miller had engaged with intra- and international relations – are gone and only the barest remnants of American history remain to be uncovered. Despite this absence, the text retains the Dark Age incorporation of conventions and quotations from a wide range of literary and theoretical sources. Without the anchoring of literary history to a context, the text appears to exist in the realm of the marvellous and the purely narrative. Entering *Arkham Asylum* is to enter a world of magic, (literary) ghosts, and the most esoteric moments of theoretical psychology with very little plot to pin this content down. The unmoored narrative is then combined with an expressionist, painted art and free approach to page layouts far removed from the rigid gridding of Miller or Gibbons. We are, as Morrison makes clear on the second page, in 'that other world […] of magic and terror', and the rules of 'reality' are completely removed. The dialectics of Batman are expressed through a series of analogous divisions: the literary and the political, the interior and the exterior, the magical and the 'real'.

Morrison's text is empty of explicit political content, yet still replete with allusions to literature and mythology. Foregoing 'real' political context, the reader is pushed to consider the form of the text as the primary critical focus. If the central problem as Morrison sees it is the ongoing development of the Batman character, the attempt is toward what appears to be a 'dialectical self-generation' that relies on 'the autonomy of literary evolution' (Éjxenbaum 1971a: 32). The decision to place the narrative in a closed space as

a way of writing against what had immediately preceded it is akin to a Formalist method – altering the content of the object by altering the literary form.

The novel's publishing history supplements this argument. *Arkham Asylum* was published as a single, 'prestige-format' hardcover – a form much newer to comics than the serial publishing methods of the traditional superhero comic. Although *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* were discrete narratives allowing for their collection into a single book, they retained formal elements of serial narrative that Morrison could forego. After writing *Watchmen*, Alan Moore worked in a similar 'prestige' format for *The Killing Joke*, a narrative that shares with *Arkham Asylum* a carnival trope and a single setting (for the majority of the narrative) at the exclusion of the political context of America. The argument that the requirements of form have determined content is compelling: the prestige format, with hard covers and high-quality printing, suggests individual, colourful settings and narratives with clear boundaries. This argument fits a tenet of Formalism: 'the new form makes its appearance not in order to express a new content, but rather, to replace an old form that has already outlived its artistic usefulness' (Shklovsky 1990: 20). In effect, the eliding of the political in *Arkham Asylum* can be explained by considering that politics was an unnecessary or irrelevant framework for the new way of writing and producing the superhero comic. Instead, the character's development will take place solely within the world of genre and literature.

However, this does not quite ring true for Morrison's text. Morrison cannot so easily abandon the real conditions that shape his art, admitting that the use of the prestige format was determined by the economic desire for new markets (Morrison 2012: 225). More importantly, the narrative form that shuts out the political world enforces the significance of what it attempts to erase. Deliberately removing non-literary context, once it has been introduced to the Dark Age, by walling off the text from the outside world is an act that counter-intuitively reinforces the importance of this context through its absence. The text is both framed and haunted by the world beyond its borders that it attempts to

remove. This conclusion is truer to Morrison's text, and to Éjxenbaum's later re-evaluation that the 'relations between the facts of the literary order and facts extrinsic to it […] can only be the relations of correspondence, interaction, dependency or conditionality' (1971b: 61). Just as Formalists came to recognise the reality outside the text, readers of Morrison's attempt to depoliticise the Dark Age must not lose sight of what has shaped this attempt. In *Arkham Asylum*, the closed system is framed by its context whether or not this context is made explicit. Porousness, and the interchange between the boundaries of the real and the fictional, provokes the dialectical shifts Morrison seeks. The reader's focus then becomes these subtler, more evanescent relations between the text and the extrinsic world that persist even as they are repressed.

The narrative of *Arkham Asylum* is framed by the outside world (in its first and final pages) and haunted throughout by historical ghosts and traces that intrude into the closed system of the asylum. The 'logic of the ghost', suggests Jacques Derrida, exceeds a 'binary or dialectic logic […] that distinguishes or opposes' presence and non-presence (2006: 63). I want to argue that it is this porosity or undermining of the binary that determines Morrison's text. To formalise this logic of the ghost within the dialectical movement of Morrison, I will suggest it is possible to perceive something like the Derridaean 'trace' of an idea within its negation – a haunting of the text that determines its forward movement. The implication of this trace-effect is inherently political, as well as textual. Derrida suggests: 'hegemony still organises the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony' (2006: 46). In the act of repression, hegemonic structures reconfirm the ideas they wish to eradicate, just as Morrison reconfirms the existence of the political as he moves to close off his narrative. The parallel is essential, for in *Arkham Asylum* Morrison takes on the role of the hegemonic state that organises repression. Previously, the state enforced a diagnosis of 'social disease' upon Batman as a method of maintaining the hegemony Batman threatened. Morrison takes up that diagnosis and enacts it, setting in motion the act Frank Miller

vehemently rejected – placing Batman in the asylum. Overcoming the division between presence and non-presence, the traces of the political state and the early Dark Age are not simply haunting the text but determining it: contriving to become present through their absence, as ghosts.

In order to read *Arkham Asylum* within the Dark Age, in this chapter I will unveil the spectres of the historical and political context that Morrison reconfigures as ghostly presences or intrusions upon his text. Unlike the other major works of the Dark Age there is no 'smoking gun' for *Arkham Asylum* itself: there is no moment in the texts or paratexts where Morrison makes an explicit claim to legitimacy that uses the nineteenth-century Romance.[22] Instead, the conventions of the Dark Romance are visible in the text primarily as revisions to Miller and Moore and held-over conventions of gothic writing. At this point in the Dark Age, the incorporation of a nineteenth-century American version of gothic fiction had become an effect largely divorced from its point of origin yet the ghosts of its conventions, and the convention of the ghost, still tie the texts to American literary history. To reveal this ongoing context that seeps through the text, I will examine the attempt to 'save' the Batman character, considering the negations (of negations), dialectical reversals, and renewals Morrison engenders. These issues are confronted by first examining the role of *Arkham Asylum* within the context of Dark Age comics. Then, I take on the hauntings and traces of nineteenth-century culture and twentieth-century theory that remain in the text. I conclude by studying the moment of dialectical reversal in Morrison's narrative, a moment that almost directly parallels Poe's 'The Tale of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether'.

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[22] There is, however, plenty of evidence that Morrison reads nineteenth-century American fiction. I discuss in chapter 6 (below) an example from only a year after *Arkham Asylum* where Morrison quotes directly from Poe to give a character an aura of learnedness.

From Miller and Moore to Morrison: 'Curing' the Dark Age Batman

The Dark Age haunts *Arkham Asylum*, and Morrison presents the innovations of Miller and Moore as a spectre of the negative to which he must respond. Although there are a number of differences between them, Morrison's writing back to the 1986 comics produces a work built from the same bricks as *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*. The comparison is unavoidable as soon as the text is opened: on the first page, a quotation from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* asks the reader to site the text within a literary tradition that can be traced back to nineteenth-century fantasy, and simultaneously recalls Moore's use of epigraph and quotation to frame the narrative in *Watchmen*. This reading is reinforced by the opening lines of the narrative. The first words, 'from the journals of Amadeus Arkham', are remarkably similar to *Watchmen'*s opening line, 'Rorschach's journal' (I:1). The intertextual and metatextual devices of epigraph and journal in *Watchmen* are replicated by Morrison, deliberately writing back to Moore whilst also making use of the potential of these devices to lend an air of legitimacy to the text.

Just as Morrison borrows the technique of using literary allusion to appropriate literary legitimacy from Moore, his comics also build on an admixture of twentieth-century political and social thought to develop new possibilities for the superhero. In this respect, Morrison's tactic is much more brazen than either of the previous authors. He does not shy away from a bold claim about the intellectual background to his work, stating that a love of 'psychoanalytical theory, comic books and post-modernist thought' was brought to bear on *Arkham Asylum* (2004: script title page). This admission is problematic. In Miller or Moore, the theory informing the texts is not deployed as a reason for legitimacy in of itself. Instead, it appears within the text as part of the author's goal to create a more complex narrative that contains the same combinations of political thought and fiction found in their models of legitimate literature. By contrast, with very little of the world outside the asylum shown in the text, deliberately looking for 'post-modernist thought' risks playing into

Morrison's hands. To do so would make reading his text an exercise in hermeneutics, furthering his own desires to make the political analyses of superheroes developed by Miller or Moore irrelevant.

Morrison goads the reader in this direction. In an Anniversary Edition of the text that is as replete with scholarly apparatus as superhero comics ever are, he suggests that: 'much of [the] subtextual material was lost on the casual reader but that didn't seem to stop us from shifting mega-amounts of copies' (2004: 51). The 'casual readers' Morrison appears to deride as mindless consumers can hardly be blamed for missing the 'subtextual material'. The tangled mix of psychology, theology, mythology and critical theory that apparently underlies the work is, realistically, only available to those willing to navigate the paratexts of Morrison's script and annotations – content that was not available until 2004. The critical response to *Arkham Asylum* must sift this material, but must balance this work with a reading that foregrounds Morrison's intertexts and contexts and fills in the background to his constructed world.

Despite much of Morrison's 'subtextual' content being essentially irrelevant to understanding the text, certain points of theoretical analysis bear fruit. Arriving after the focus on madness in the early Dark Age, Morrison intends to treat Batman, rescue him from psychopathy and return him to his true heroic status. His engagement follows the line of the writers who condemned Batman as mad: it is rooted in nineteenth-century culture and twentieth-century critical theory. Given this background, the text's focus on the gothic mansion, transfigured into the asylum, suggests an investigation that looks to nineteenth-century uses of the asylum in America, or twentieth-century theories of asylum practice. Morrison's purpose emerges from these traces of the 'real' world. Rather than expose superheroes as mad by considering their world a real possibility, as Moore had done in *Watchmen*, he makes Batman's world unreal, creating a Bakhtinian carnival space where the order of things is reversed. This is Morrison's first dialectical shock: the act of making

unreal is the act of making un-mad, and rescuing Batman from the pole of psychopathy. Perversely, this act is achieved by placing Batman into the asylum.

A focus on institutionalization and criminal psychology is a hallmark of the Dark Age, prevalent in some form in all the major works of the period. By the 1980s, Batman and his bizarre and colourful enemies had been in existence for some 40 years, but the recognition that his world might require a facility for the long-term treatment of the 'criminally insane' does not seem to have taken place before the first appearance of Arkham Asylum in 1974. It was even longer before the role and history of the facility was established (Rosenberg and Kosslyn 2013: 38). The introduction of this new element to the Batman mythos should be related to the changing nature of the public discourse on psychology and psychiatry in the 1970s and 80s. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the new focus on psychiatric practice within superhero comics happened at the same time as the relaxing of the Comics Code. It should not be forgotten that the psychiatric community had been instrumental in the restrictions placed on comics for the previous thirty years, and in many cases creators were keen to return fire.[23]

The critique of mental health practice by the post-1960s anti-psychiatry movement was taken up by an industry and art-form that had suffered at the hands of, and was still subject to, zealous psychiatrists' concern with public health. Broader changes in attitudes toward mental health in the 1960s also saw a move toward de-medicalising psychiatry, reconsidering the traditional model of the asylum and hospital in favour of new therapeutic relationships between patient and practitioner (Crossley 2006: 89). This context, despite being largely absent from the text itself, is present in attitudes toward mental health treatment throughout the Dark Age. For the most part, comics culture was justly wary of

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[23] The most well-known campaigner against comics from the field of psychiatry, besides Fredric Wertham, was Dr Thomas Radecki. The founder of the National Coalition on TV Violence, Radecki appeared in public regularly throughout the 1980s condemning comics, television and *Dungeons & Dragons*. The December 1989 issue of *The Comics Journal* featured interviews with both Radecki and Wertham in a special issue on violence in comics, indicating the return to prominence of the issue during the Dark Age.

psychiatry, and texts like *Dark Knight* reflect this sentiment. On the other hand, comics writers interested in the more esoteric aspects of 1960s counterculture found gurus in experimental practitioners. Like much cultural production post-1960, comics was heavily influenced by a moment where the relationships between authority and treatment were changing.

The absent-presence of Morrison's context begins to make sense of some of the more unusual choices in his text. As an illustrative example, the presence of Carl Jung and Aleister Crowley in *Arkham Asylum* can be traced to the relationship between psychoanalysis and 1960s countercultures. Both Jung and Crowley are regular references for Robert Anton Wilson, whose blend of magic, psychoanalysis, and drug writing influenced Morrison just as it did Moore (Morrison and Babcock 2004). Similarly, the presentation of an asylum threatened by its own inmates is a reflection of the changing nature of asylum practice. By the 1980s, the idea that institutionalisation was an effective method of cure had fallen out of favour. Instead, the asylum had become a place to incarcerate those too dangerous to live in the outside world (Yanni 2007: 148-49). Morrison's text bears the legacy of these changes of attitude. Arkham Asylum functions in the text as a gothic and imposing structure for criminals, rather than the utopian vision of a place of wellness, but the text also contains an esoteric dimension derived from the twentieth-century history of radical psychiatry.

Given the anti-asylum discourse of the 1960s onwards, Morrison's choice to send Batman into the asylum appears anachronistic. In the world of DC Comics, Arkham Asylum's most common form is as a stage for a gothic horror. It is undeniably well-suited to this function: it is little more than a holding pen for Gotham's most dangerous and supernatural villains, and very rarely does it treat its inmates. By his own admission, Morrison is attempting to keep the gothic setting *and* to use the asylum as a genuine method of curing the sickness given to Batman by Miller and Moore. Understanding how it can do both requires us to look back at the asylum's history. The idea of the asylum as a

place of treatment was refined and popularised by a transatlantic alienism that had its roots in revolutionary France. Initially conceived as a place for treatment without chains, a place to heal mental illness and prevent a life of abuse in the workhouse, the asylum in America would later become its own symbol of confinement and disease. Both elements of this history are present in Morrison's setting, and the traces of a varied history of uses and representations of the asylum haunt the text.[24]

In particular, a Foucauldian interpretation of madness and the asylum seems to have made an impression on Morrison. His use of the asylum to make Batman a more effective hero within his society appears to be a naïve reading of a Foucauldian history. Foucault suggests that the 'abolition of constraint' in the asylum 'substituted the free terror of madness for the stifling anguish of responsibility' (2001: 234). In the workhouse the mad were physically restrained, but in the asylum their self-consiousness was organised into a system of punishment which rewarded reason with liberty. For Foucault, the therapeutic intervention of the asylum was to develop an awareness of the self and the 'non-reciprocal relation' to the Other – the keeper or warden. Knowing that their actions make them vulnerable to themselves and to punishment by the Other, the awareness creates a 'free and responsible subject' (2001: 235). The transition has a parallel in Morrison's narrative: Morrison aims to bring Batman back into the line of responsibility and public service and away from the Rorschach model of a psychopathic vigilante acting out his own moral code. When Rorschach acts outside the law, he is manacled and placed in a prison. Morrison's Batman, on the other hand, will voluntarily enter and leave an asylum.

Treatment in the asylum, for Foucault, had three major methods: silence, 'recognition by mirror', and perpetual judgement (2001: 247-252). It is the second that is

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[24] I will use alienism as the term in this chapter to cover the varieties of mental health practice and treatment in the nineteenth century that would become psychiatry, psychology and so forth in the twentieth century. The nature of the early stages of the discipline, particularly when it is fictionalised, requires a common term for a number of practices that would be considered distinct today.

most important here. For Foucault, recognition by mirror is the process where the patient is shown someone with a similar condition. Face-to-face with madness in the other, they recognise themselves. Morrison puts his Batman through the same process in order to save him. Not only is there a lot of symbolic mirror-gazing in *Arkham Asylum*, entering the asylum will force Batman to confront his own madness in the unchained behaviour of the other inmates. Batman recognises this possibility even before he enters the asylum, stating: 'sometimes I… question the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that when I walk through those asylum gates […] it'll just be like coming home'. At the beginning of his novel, Morrison accepts the madness of Batman as Miller and Moore have drawn it, and has Batman confront the issue head-on. In doing so, the character is dialectically shifted towards the position of non-madness: in his ability to recognise the diagnosis, he begins to negate it. Morrison's process for Batman is somewhere between Foucault and Formalism – a change in position brought about through self-recognition, like the 'dialectical self-generation' Éjxenbaum proposes for literature.

The character of Amadeus Arkham, the asylum's founder, acts as a counterpart to Batman and suggests Morrison has not entirely missed the critique of institutional power that is Foucault's purpose. Arkham's primary motive is the desire to replace punishment with rehabilitation, implicitly following the stated goal of the nineteenth-century asylum superintendent to treat rather than incarcerate. He laments of his patient Mad Dog: 'how many more like him must there be? Men whose only crime is mental illness, trapped in the penal system with no hope of treatment'. Nevertheless, both the penal system and the asylum system prove to be failures, and these failures seal the fate of patient and doctor alike. Imprisonment cannot contain madness: Mad Dog escapes the penitentiary and murders Arkham's family. In response, Arkham takes Mad Dog into his asylum and is praised for his compassion in continuing to attempt treatment. The compassion proves to be mistaken when Arkham uses the cover of an institution where he has sole authority to take revenge and murder Mad Dog. After a cycle of killing and revenge, Arkham's abuse of his

position of authority is followed by his own descent into madness and, eventually, he is condemned to become a prisoner in the asylum himself. In another moment of 'recognition by mirror', his position in the power-structure engendered by the asylum model is reversed. In the narrative of Amadeus Arkham, Morrison shows the flaws inherent in the model of 'treatment without chains' and acknowledges a Foucauldian critique of the asylum model as a tangible threat to his attempt at regeneration.

Whilst Batman attempts to dialectically self-generate his new form, Arkham succumbs to the fate prescribed by the accumulated context of the asylum. In the trajectory of Amadeus Arkham, Morrison unites Rorschach, Ozymandias, and Miller's version of Batman with the history of asylum practice. The shift from compassionate hero to deranged arbiter of a personal vision of justice is synchronous with the move from freedom to incarceration. The asylum itself follows the same path, from a utopian vision of a place of freedom to another institution of imprisonment. The existence of Arkham as a ghost or trace haunts the text and reminds the reader of the inevitable fate that is imposed by the combined weight of history and hegemony. Inevitably, Arkham's ghost carries a host of connotative values. Following a well-worn path as he slides into madness, he carries traces of several nineteenth-century gothic conventions: the monstrous philanthropist, the deranged dissenter, the man driven mad by guilt. Displacing at least some of these literary traces from Batman onto Arkham, Morrison subtly, and perhaps accidentally, acknowledges and incorporates the literary context of Miller and Moore in order to 'rescue' the Batman from the two writers' interpretations.

Making the rescue of Batman his ultimate goal, the underlying concern of Morrison's text becomes a better system of institutionalisation and reform. When Morrison focuses on the system itself, the connections he makes between his novel and the 1986 comics begins to look back to a longer literary history as the conventions of the Dark Romance seep through. In *Dark Knight*, the suggestion that Batman should be institutionalised is presented as preposterous, but the narrative still leads Batman into the

police cells to free those imprisoned, and then to his (fake) death. For Miller, these elements of the narrative demonstrate the incompatibility between the state's laws and Batman's justice. Similarly, when Bartleby is confined to The Tombs, Melville creates a sense of unease at his punishment: he is a 'deranged' man unfairly surrounded by 'murderers and thieves' (1987: 43). Those familiar with the prison system cannot tell the difference – 'I thought that friend of yourn was a gentleman forger' states the grub-man (Melville 1987: 44). One might feel the same way about Amadeus Arkham. Driven mad by the failings of a state system of law, he takes justice into his own hands and ends his life in a place where the line between criminal and mentally ill no longer holds: the 'Asylum for the Criminally Insane'. Eventually Arkham will die in the asylum and Bartleby will die in the Tombs, gothic prisoners of a state that does not separate criminality, mental illness and dissent. Melville and Miller indicate that the line between deranged and dissenter is not at all clear in their America. Morrison's text draws on the same conventions for Arkham, presenting the trajectory as a ghostly threat to Batman.

To prevent Batman from following Arkham into prison or into death, Morrison builds a symbolic system of reform that preserves the original goal of the asylum. The primary symbol of redemption in *Arkham Asylum* is the moon, which Morrison explains 'basically represents the darkness through which we must pass to reach the dawn' (2004: 1). In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne presents a similar model of reprieve for the gothic prisoner. As a counter to the system of institutionalisation under which Clifford has suffered, Holgrave suggests that 'moonlight, and the sentiment in man's heart responsive to it, are the greatest of renovators and reformers' (Hawthorne 1983: 536). Although the moon is an obvious symbolic choice given its long association with madness, in both cases the focus is redemption rather than incurable insanity. Morrison goes further still, later connecting the moon to Christian mythology as a symbol of redemption – another tradition that can help 'save' the Batman and see him reborn or resurrected (2004: 32). Morrison gives primary position to moonlight within his symbolic system, opening the text

with moonlight over the asylum. The effect not only emphasises his own conception of the asylum as a place for reform, but authorises his text by invoking the long history of his symbols and conventions.

Thomas Cooley has noted that 'moonlight in Hawthorne's works is usually a metaphor for the power of the imagination' (2001: 171). Similarly, for Morrison, moonlight becomes the signifier of the redemptive power of re-imagining in fiction. To undo the gothic superheroes of Miller and Moore, Morrison makes the spectre of Batman's fall from hero to monster into a ghost that stalks the asylum. The spectre of Amadeus Arkham reminds the reader that Batman's journey has previously ended in incarceration and death, but under the shadow of moonlight, the asylum is an 'other world': a closed space where the hero's end can be rewritten. Beginning with the reality of its failings, the asylum has been returned to the 'reality of the appearance' and become a place of treatment. In *Arkham Asylum*, Morrison changes the conventions of the Dark Age, and changes the hero in the process. Where Miller and Moore had buried their heroes in their mansions – Batman under the collapsed Wayne Manor, Rorschach as a 'body in the foundations' – Morrison will resurrect them.

Batman and The Age of the Asylum

'All the fantastic literature of madness and horror […] takes place, preferentially, in the strongholds of confinement', wrote Foucault in his study of asylum practice (2001: 199-200). The Foucauldian mode of *Arkham Asylum* places the text in a lineage of gothic and fantastic fiction that united the haunted and the confined space. Foucault's point is to connect the French movement towards asylum treatment with the literature produced under this model, making specific reference to the Marquis de Sade, who spent much of his life in institutions of confinement. He concludes that horror and confinement are intertwined because the development of what we would now call gothic literature is a 'reawakening of

the fantastic in the very places where unreason had been reduced to silence' (2001: 199). In Foucault's analysis, unreason becomes a threat to the Enlightenment state. The state opposes unreason by shutting it away in the asylum, yet in the act of repression, unreason 'reawakens' or leaves the trace of itself as literature – the content of unreason is expressed through a new form. Rather than a Formalist purely self-generating act, the external pressures of repression promote a dialectical change of form for the content of unreason. The point is salient for Morrison, whose fiction is generated by a gothic literature of confinement.[25]

The duality of asylum treatment as both utopian reform program and tool of state suppression articulated by Foucault finds a similar fictional form in *Arkham Asylum*. In particular, the blend of repressive and utopian models recalls the transatlantic nature of asylum practice. Where Foucault's major concern is with the asylum as it existed in Europe in the years following the 1789 French revolution, scholars of American asylum history point to a different model emerging from the same source. For Foucault, confinement in the asylum was a tool to preserve the new Enlightenment state. In America, paralleling the French influence on the American revolution, the actualities of repression were lost in the journey of utopian ideals across the Atlantic. For alienists in the United States, the asylum was a concrete representation of the potential to build a new world. Morrison clearly draws inspiration from both sides of the Atlantic in his writing, suggesting that *Arkham Asylum* was intended to be 'European' and 'un-American' despite its American setting (2012: 225). As was the case with *Watchmen*, a vast amount of cultural context is bound together by this aim. Through the asylum, the text is connected to the dreams of the New World in revolutionary France, and transatlantic intellectual culture of the late eighteenth and

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[25] Although it is not present in *Arkham Asylum*, there is a direct relationship of influence from de Sade to Morrison that is made clear when De Sade features as a character in *The Invisibles* (Morrison and others 2014: 166-67).

nineteenth century. Revolutionary spectres, in the manner of Derrida's argument, haunt the text.

Being haunted by spectres, even those of the revolution, creates a gothic text that has as much in common with haunted-house fiction as it does with utopian asylum practice. Whilst the ideals of European practice were being imported to the United States, the Dark Romantic response to the American asylum looked back across the ocean to the European haunted house as way of commenting on the new institutions of repression. This background explains a common theme among the writers of the Dark Age. Morrison follows the American gothic synthesis of European and American traditions of asylum treatment. Since these were intrinsically connected to a concern with a new world, Morrison shares this theme with Miller and Moore. Investigating this context in more detail, I will show that even in a closed system such as Morrison's fictional interior, the text is determined by the asylum both as a historical entity and as fictional convention. Furthermore, these historical and fictional entities are not at all as separate as the closed system makes them appear.

In contrast to the repression of unreason proposed by Foucault, David Rothman suggests that American asylums were utopian institutions, built to order with an architecture designed to combat the environmental stressors of city life. The sudden building of asylums, penitentiaries and almshouses from around 1820 onwards constituted 'a revolution in social practice' deliberately analogous to the perceived emancipations of citizens in France and the United States (1971: x). Europeans, Rothman notes, were sceptical toward the American model. European treatment facilities 'were frequently nothing more than a new name carved in an ancient doorway', and the repurposing of old buildings for treatment was a source of debate among the transatlantic alienist community (1971: 135-36). Morrison's asylum, a former family home, is architecturally closer to the model of the European asylum in an American city, but retains some of the American setting in its functions. The asylum at Arkham is both a holding pen for unreason and

threats to the state (the criminals who are the majority of the inhabitants), but also has a purpose akin to that of the American concern with the 'urban environment': treating the individual through the processes of removal from the environment, renewal, and return. In both setting and use (form and function) the Asylum reads as transatlantic; a reflection of the text itself and the wider scope of the Dark Age.

Just as it was in France, the utopian ideal of the American asylum is generated by Enlightenment visions of a better society. The basis for the utopian reformist method of the asylum was, at least in part, the belief in the early and mid-nineteenth century that insanity was the price paid for civilisation. It was widely accepted that the United States was both the most civilised nation and had the highest incidence of insanity (Rothman 1971: 112-13). Examples of this discourse common at the time included stories of slaves set free who lost their reason in their new circumstances and 'class stratification caused by urbanisation' (Yanni 2007: 5). Modernisation, liberty and civilisation are the ostensible causes of societal breakdown, although both examples also conceal fears and deep-seated antipathies along race and class lines. The fear of urbanisation prominent in Dark Romantic writing that carries over to Miller's work is here refined to become the fear of insanity incipient in the urban environment. Morrison taps into these fears in his re-reading of the American gothic and the 1986 comics, although, once again, the presence of race or class divides is lost in the process.

Rothman writes that the relationship between civilisation and insanity in America created a particular focus on the new democratic politics of the Republic. Paraphrasing Isaac Ray, he indicates that 'Americans […] judged eternal vigilance to be the price of liberty, but they ought to remember all of its costs' (Rothman 1971: 118). The new democracy, it was believed, gave ambition to the common man whilst also requiring constant attention from him – the government was not trusted to act fairly without the eyes of the people holding it to account. The cost here is not only that ambition and constant attention place considerable strain on the mental faculties, but the eventual result of

constant vigilance is the conspiratorial outlook of Jacksonian America. As discussed in the previous chapter, Rorschach embodies this outlook as a consequence of his historical origins in the nineteenth century: constant vigilance is barely one step away from conspiratorial insanity. Although Moore is clear on Rorschach's need for psychological treatment (at least, in the terms of the state that he lives in), Morrison extends the nineteenth-century discourse one step further. The result of the discourse that linked madness and civilisation was the asylum, which isolated its patients from society in order to treat them. This is where the narrative begins for Morrison's Batman.

In response to the need to treat Batman's madness, Morrison's importation of the European model of a repurposed mansion as asylum is out of place in the context of the American purpose-built model. On the other hand, it has plenty in common with an American literary tradition. The path taken by Morrison follows in the footsteps of Hawthorne and Poe, whose criticism of the failings of utopian ideals borrows from European gothic conventions. There is an analogous relationship between the repurposed asylum and the European-style haunted houses of the House of Usher and the House of the Seven Gables, which act as prisons for characters in mental distress. Like these aristocratic mansions, Arkham Asylum is an ancestral home, with all the historical and social context the American purpose-built asylum sought to avoid. Confirming the American fears of the repurposed building, Arkham Asylum is too haunted, too much a carrier of madness and with too much history for it to be an appropriate building for treatment.

Why, then, is Batman able to undergo a successful treatment in the asylum? The asylum program of the United States was intended to model a new world – to be a utopian program that demonstrated and cured the ills of American society (Rothman 1971: xix). On the other hand, the gothic background of Batman gives him inherently transatlantic qualities and his connection to the Old World. In *Arkham Asylum*, a text that is both European and American, Batman and the asylum straddle both continents, becoming transatlantic. The parallel Morrison creates between Amadeus Arkham and Batman

(particularly when Arkham makes a transatlantic journey during the narrative) emphasises the European, aristocratic qualities at the heart of the Batman mythology – a feature typical of the Dark Age. Batman, unlike Arkham's other captives, is capable in an environment haunted by history and aristocracy: that is his own environment, particularly at Wayne Manor, and Arkham Asylum is like 'coming home'.

Although the utopianism of the American asylum is downplayed in favour of the European haunted house, the traces that remain serve to connect Morrison to Miller. I argued above that Miller's politics are in line with a nineteenth-century utopianism evident in Transcendentalist projects like Brook Farm: Miller wants his Batman to reform the community through the power of his example. Rothman's history confirms a connection between the asylum as a place of incarceration and the social reformers of the nineteenth century when he states that the asylum movement 'had an obvious similarity to the goals of the penitentiary, and both ventures resembled in spirit and outlook the communitarian movements of the period such as Brook Farm and New Harmony' (1971: 133). The quest to transform America involved both the model community and the treatment institution. In his response to antebellum utopian idealism, *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne conjoins the two entities as Hollingsworth seeks to use the model community to create the reform institution. In line with the critical impulse of the American Romance, Hollingsworth succumbs to the perils of his work and becomes monstrous in his quest for reform. Miller's Batman suffered the same fate, and so too does Amadeus Arkham: he is driven mad by his attempt to create a reform institution and is (literally) imprisoned by his utopian program.

Countering and criticising the utopian dream of building a new world, the fear of being haunted by history is apparent throughout the Dark Romances. Befitting a moment that continually looks to the past for its inspiration, this concern with lineage and legacy recurs in *Arkham Asylum*. In this case, the haunting of inhabitants of the asylum bears a strong resemblance to the haunting of the House of Seven Gables. Matthew Maule has 'little hesitation or difficulty in rising out of his grave' to frighten the house's inhabitants,

insisting 'that he was the rightful proprietor of the site upon which the house stood' (Hawthorne 1983: 514). Whilst this rationale suggests he would haunt any inhabitant who gained the house, the system of familial property ensures the curse has become part of the 'Pyncheon inheritance' (1983: 369). Amadeus Arkham, by comparison, bears witness to his own devolvement to the level of Maule and is destined to haunt any further inhabitants of his house. He writes of feeling that 'the house became my whole world […] so vast, so confidently REAL that by comparison I felt little more than a GHOST haunting its corridors'. Appearing as such to Cavendish and Batman, he fulfils his destiny. 'Scarcely aware that anything could exist beyond those melancholy walls', Arkham remains inside the asylum even after his death, ready to haunt anyone who questions his status as 'rightful proprietor'. In both cases, the weight of history and a European system of property rights undermine the ideal new world of America, and of the asylum.

Juxtaposing the two hauntings reveals the influence of previous figurations of the gothic haunted house and the treatment facility on Morrison's text. As in Hawthorne's haunted house, the building itself has a power over its inhabitants that originates in a fear of history and is expressed through the motif of haunting. In the end, Morrison's closed space of the asylum is determined by the historical and literary ghosts of the haunted house. These ghosts enter the text even when the ostensible effort of the writing is to deny them. Just as Hawthorne used rumour, gossip and folklore to create rational and supernatural explanations for events in *The House of Seven Gables* or *The Scarlet Letter*, Morrison gives the reader a choice not to believe in his haunted asylum at all. Dr Ruth, the archetype of the sceptical modern scientist, dismisses rumours of 'secret passages, the ghost of mad Amadeus Arkham, the door that's supposed to bleed' as 'local folklore'. Her dismissals have a similar function to the multiple interpretations of a strange event offered in Hawthorne's Romances. In both cases, the final decision on the nature of supernatural comes down to the reader, who must decide between a rational truth and the fantastic.

In the best demonstration of this effect, and one of the few light-hearted moments of the text, Dr Ruth dismisses the idea of a haunted asylum as 'gothic crap'. Whilst it might show some self-awareness on Morrison's part, the description was unfortunately found apt by many readers of his text who found the stereotypes too much to bear. At the same time as her scepticism reminds the reader of the attitude of the scientist, Dr Ruth's choice of words places Morrison's haunted asylum in long tradition of gothic haunted houses, and harks back to the age when the collocation of the haunted house and the asylum embedded itself in the popular imagination. It appears that the external, political world, particularly in trace form, exerts a pressure on the Batman after all, as the history of asylum treatment enters the text *through* the traditions of gothic literature.

With the benefit of hindsight, Morrison asks the reader to analyse the failings of a system of treatment that was supposed to reduce long-term incarceration, and has now become the embodiment of an eternity in haunted, gothic prison. Paradoxically, it is these very failings of the asylum that will become the impetus for the generation of new fictional forms for the Batman. Where initially 'the new world of the insane would correct within its restricted domain the faults of the community and through the power of example spark a general reform movement' (Rothman 1971: 133), the promise of reform it now offers is *through* its failings. This is, in a sense, the ideal of the European recognition-by-mirror treatment, but it is also a dialectical move at the heart of Morrison's method. To be a place of treatment for the Batman, the asylum must fail the majority of its inhabitants. It cannot be wholly an American utopia nor a European repressive institution. Instead, the traces of both haunt the text, creating a space that can exhaust the negative form of Batman and regenerate him.

Madness and Faculty Psychology

> Sometimes I think the asylum is a head. We're inside a huge head that
> dreams us all into being. Perhaps it's your head, Batman. Arkham is a
> looking glass. And we are you. (Morrison and McKean 2004)

My argument presents *Arkham Asylum* as a text that operates through divisions. However, these divisions are not concrete. The boundaries are porous, and the poles can be reversed. Having considered the way in which historical context seeps through the outer walls of the asylum, in this section I will consider its internal dynamics, following the Mad Hatter's proposition that it is 'a huge head that dreams us all into being'. Madness is the subject at the centre of *Arkham Asylum,* yet, the terms of the issue are problematically vague in the Dark Age authors, often referring to Batman as 'repressed' or 'psychopathic' without a clinical foundation. On one hand, the use of such language is appropriately suggestive of the generalised portrayals of mental illness common in pre-clinical terminology, such as Melville's use of 'deranged'. Nevertheless, it is worth considering that one might expect a text that is specifically concerned with exhausting this madness to incorporate a more carefully considered conception of Batman's internal world.

Batman's encounter with the Mad Hatter, quoted above, provides more clues to the nature of his madness. On the surface, the Mad Hatter's speech is in line with what has become a typical psychology of the Batman: Batman's enemies reflect elements of his own psyche, distorted to their limit. This is the Dark Age standard that produces the mirror, and particularly the broken mirror, as a recurring convention in Batman's confrontations. However, Morrison alters the convention when he suggests that the asylum collectively, rather than any one foe individually, is the true reflection of Batman's internal workings – Arkham is the looking glass. The Mad Hatter's follow-up statement makes more sense of his reasoning. Suggesting that 'we are you', he constitutes the asylum not as a building but as the sum of its inhabitants. Just as each has their own room or space in the asylum, as a

collective they all represent his psyche. The asylum is the mirror of Batman's mind, and disorder reigns in both as house and mind struggle to maintain order over their contents.

Even within a representation of madness that seems to look solely to Batman's history within comics, the ghosts of literature past still haunt the text. In fact, the conjoining of asylum and head by the Mad Hatter creates a unified and complex theory of Batman's madness that can only be understood in reference to a nineteenth-century discourse. The metaphor of the mind as a house or mansion is not original to Morrison, and has a long history in both literature and in psychological treatment. Somewhat unsurprisingly, given the small pool of texts the Dark Age writers draw from or return to, it is exactly the metaphor Poe uses to symbolise madness in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. In the story, Usher recites his poem 'The Haunted Palace'. During this recitation, the narrator, due to the 'the mystic current of its meaning', perceives 'the tottering of [Usher's] lofty reason' (Poe 1984: 325). The haunted palace of the poem becomes, in the context of the narrative, an emblem of the madness that affects the speaker. The two texts, as gothic tales of madness, demonstrably share a very particular pattern. They take place in a haunted mansion that harks to a European aristocratic past. This mansion is also a place of treatment for the sick trapped within it. Within the mansion, a haunted mansion of the mind is evoked. This mansion mirrors the physical space and metaphorizes the protagonist's mental state.

The comparable pattern of internal and external space in gothic tales can be directly linked to early discourses in mental health. Throughout the nineteenth century, a link was made between physical space and mental wellbeing, particularly by asylum architects (Yanni 2007: 8). Thomas Cooley, whose work contains the most in-depth analysis of the mansion/mind metaphor in nineteenth-century America, collates these links with an idea he calls 'faculty psychology'. Faculty psychology, as Cooley defines it, is the pre-Freudian theory that the mind is 'compartmentalized into separate roomlike seats or powers that work together in the healthy mind but are fragmented or disordered in the insane mind' (2001: xvi). The prominence of the discourse of faculty psychology begins to make sense

of the recurrent mansion/mind metaphor, and Cooley refers specifically to Poe's 'The Haunted Palace' in his analysis (2001: 28). Poe's use of terms such as 'disordered' or 'inorganization' to describe Roderick Usher's madness (Poe 1984: 327), as well as the very specific metaphor of the house as palace, are given context by the rediscovery of this discourse. Cooley's point, at least in part, is that invoking this particular facet of nineteenth-century American thought can explain conventions found across a number of nineteenth-century writers (Cooley 2001: xxv). It is not difficult to extend his argument to explain the particular similarities between Morrison and Poe.

There is evidence to suggest Morrison and McKean were working in a tradition descended from the faculty psychology model. The background to The Mad Hatter's speech resembles a phrenological diagram, except the recognisable form of the diagram is altered so that each section depicts a room and its associated activity. Given the Mad Hatter's exposition of the metaphor of the house as head that the image accompanies, the combination poses the head as a house of multiple rooms or compartments – the faculty psychology model. Although the diagram is not in the script, McKean's art makes a link between Morrison's writing, phrenology, and faculty psychology. The two discourses are, of course, historically connected – both rely on the idea of the brain and mind as divisible into separate functional compartments. Morrison and McKean, working in tandem, compound the metaphor of the asylum as the mirror to Batman's mind by incorporating the same nineteenth-century pseudoscience that informed the antebellum gothic.

There is no doubt Poe was familiar with the discourses of phrenology and faculty psychology. Both ideas are evoked by the vocabulary of the long preamble on the 'mental features discoursed of as the analytical' that frames 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. In the preliminary essay, the passage on the 'constructive or combining power' suggests that 'the phrenologists (I believe erroneously) have assigned [it] a separate organ, supposing it a primitive faculty' (Poe 1984: 397-399). Having established the context for his tale, the narrative proper is tied to the essay by the statement that it 'will appear to the reader

somewhat in the light of a commentary upon the propositions advanced' (Poe 1984: 400). Generally sceptical or satirical towards modish or unproven currents of scientific practice, here Poe offers the possibility of a stronger connection between faculty psychology and gothic or Dark Romantic writing. Immediately following the discourse on mental powers, Poe runs through a litany of gothic conventions for his narrative. Dupin is a man of 'an illustrious family' reduced to poverty by 'untoward events' and 'enamored of the Night'; he meets the narrator first in 'an obscure library' whilst both seek the same rare book; they later arrange to share a 'time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which we did not inquire' (Poe 1984: 400-401). If this narrative is a commentary on the imaginative and analytic powers, these faculties are bound to gothic atmospheres. Furthermore, these elements are shared by the protagonists of *Arkham Asylum*. Both Batman, the patient, and Arkham, the alienist, inherit an aristocratic mansion, and a madness framed in terms of faculty psychology, from the nineteenth-century gothic: it is no wonder that their houses reflect their mental state.

Cooley notes that 'shaky structures in classic American literature' are representative of faculty psychology. The decaying House of Usher, as one of many other canonical literary structures, enacts 'the labyrinth of a house divided from itself by mental disorder' (Cooley 2001: 29). The house 'divided from itself' is literalised in the tales' final scenes as the house splits in two, collapsing in harmony with the collapse of the mental faculties of its inhabitants. The scene of the collapse is lit by moonlight, something Cooley makes note of for its association with madness (Cooley 2001: 30). By comparison, Morrison does not explicitly collapse the asylum at the end of his tale, but his closing scene is virtually a replica. The final two pages show Two-Face holding his silver dollar, previously identified with the moon in the text, and staring at a house of cards. In the last panels, he knocks the house down. According to Morrison, he has 'transcended destiny and made himself free'. The cards go flying and the Moon card fills the final panel. The ending of *Arkham Asylum* is a replica of the ending of 'House of Usher' within Morrison's symbolic system: under

the moonlight of both lunacy and redemption, the haunted house/disordered mind collapses in on itself.

The similarity between Morrison's and Poe's narratives points to their shared concern with unmasking the inherent instability of the closed and internally self-supporting system. Not only do Morrison and Poe share a remarkably similar set of conventions, but their narrative rests on the same set of divisions. In both cases, the narrative is determined by an intrusion into the closed physical space by an outsider. In 'House of Usher', the collapse of both Usher's reason and his mansion are initiated by the visitor from the outside, just as Batman's entry into the asylum will lead to a path of conflict and destruction. Both characters disrupt a homeostasis that kept the mind/mansion structures standing, suggesting that the closed system both depends upon, and is threatened by, its relationship to the external world. Poe and Morrison share the critical, dialectical move that exposes and disrupts this relationship.

Labyrinths

As well as the parallel between mansion and mind, the discourse of faculty psychology produces the convention of depicting the mind as a labyrinth. The conjunction of the two is of particular significance to an analysis of Morrison's relationship to antebellum gothic fiction. A brief examination of the use of the metaphor of the maze or labyrinth in *Arkham Asylum* has three important outcomes. It reinforces my argument that Morrison is drawing directly from a pre-existing cultural paradigm, it begins to explain the un-navigable complexity of the text, and it points to a difference between Miller's and Morrison's uses of a Dark Age convention that is worth exploring.

In Cooley's phrase, the disordered house becomes a 'labyrinth' when the compartments or faculties do not function in proper sequence. The metaphor occurs several times in Hawthorne's fiction. The chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* titled 'The Minister in a Maze' describes Dimmesdale's thought process towards a redemptive resilience and a coming-to-terms with his situation. Comparably, in *The House of Seven Gables*, Hepzibah awaits the moment where 'her spirit would struggle out of the maze' and she will be freed from her tormented state, trapped inside the house and subject to the will of others (Hawthorne 1983: 567). The connection between the disordered house and the 'labyrinth' is repeated in *Arkham Asylum* when Amadeus Arkham wanders his mansion at night. Then, the house becomes the 'maze that dreams'. Invoking the connection between the house and the head whilst using the legacy of faculty psychology to interpret the disordered mind as a jumbled or unnavigable sequence of rooms, the 'house' of the disordered mind becomes a 'maze'.

The metaphorical state of the house is reflective of the mental state of its inhabitants, and the mental state of the inhabitants also resembles a maze they are attempting to escape. The metaphor is near breaking point of internal entanglement here, and the incomprehensible narrative it produced was responsible for most of the hostile

reactions to the text that that Singer describes (2006: 269). For Morrison, this confusion was a deliberate effect. Turning the house into a maze enables a text where disorder reigns not only in the psychology but in the geography of the narrative. Inside the asylum, nothing is explicable and there is no clear sense of space. Nor does there need to be, we might argue, since the desired effect is to replicate movement through a disordered mind that alters itself to reflect those who move through it. As Morrison suggests in his annotations, 'the construction of the story was influenced by the architecture of a house' and that 'the house and the head become one' (2004: 2). As the house and head become one reflective surface for the reader to lose themselves in, the conclusion may well be that no analysis can totally make sense of the space of the text. This might be small comfort for readers seeking a meaningful narrative, but tracing the origins of the complex and disordered narrative to the metaphor of the labyrinth demonstrates the ways it was shaped by the conventions of the nineteenth-century gothic – a valuable exercise for such a divisive text.

Morrison's concurrent metaphors of house-as-maze and house-as-mirror suggest and evoke another convention of the Dark Age Batman narrative: the 'hall of mirrors' scene. The Hall of Mirrors, a funhouse attraction that is partly a maze and partly a mass of distorted reflections, occurs in the three major Batman-Joker narratives of the period – *The Dark Knight Returns, The Killing Joke,* and *Arkham Asylum. In Arkham Asylum,* what was formerly the scene of a confrontation between Batman and the Joker is now a precursor to Batman and Joker's first face-to-face meeting in the text. Instead, Amadeus Arkham recollects being lost in the funhouse as a child. Again, acting as a stand-in for Batman, the deliberate identification of Arkham with Wayne throughout the text suggests Morrison is substituting one for the other as he recreates the conventions of the Dark Age narrative. Amadeus Arkham carries the negative interpretation of Batman's potential downfall within the asylum, and he takes Batman's place in the labyrinth.

If there are shared elements between the Dark Age hall of mirrors scenes, it might be expected that my previous analysis of the use of reflection in Miller's narratives should hold true for Morrison's use of the same convention. In that argument, the state seeks to make a comparison of the Joker to Batman in terms of a distorted counterpart image and the metaphor is literalised when the two have their showdown in the hall of mirrors. Morrison's script suggestion that McKean surround young Arkham with 'insane and evil and terrified and deformed doppelgangers' appears to follow a similar pattern, although McKean's yonic tunnel of love adds an out-of-place fear of female sexuality to the scene. The distorted mirror images confronting the young boy recall both the idea of the 'dark face' in a reflection and create the possibility of a similarly Lacanian idea of childhood development. Arkham's traumatic childhood experience is literally a 'mirror-stage', causing him to confront his own reflection and be drawn continually 'back [to] the old house'. Some twenty pages further on in the text, Batman faces the same Lacanian psychology. The moment of origin for Batman's problematic mirror-stage, his orphaning, is again retold when Dr Ruth uses a word-association game to induce Batman to relive the trauma. As if to confirm the text's Dark Age credentials, Batman smashes a mirror to free himself from his dissociative state.

However, the funhouse is not the only mirror-maze in *Arkham Asylum*. Morrison creates a new version of the convention when the Mad Hatter suggests that Arkham Asylum is both 'a looking glass' and a labyrinth. In this revision of the idea, the entirety of Batman's time inside the asylum becomes his time inside the Joker's Hall of Mirrors – a space simultaneously mirror and maze. The idea that the asylum itself is Morrison's version of the hall of mirrors convention has equally strong evidence. In *Dark Knight*, the Joker uses hostages to lure Batman into the mirror-maze (Miller 2002: 144-45); in *Arkham Asylum* he does the same to lure Batman to the mansion. Furthermore, if the asylum is the true counterpart to the hall of mirrors in *Arkham Asylum*, drawing together the two faculty psychology metaphors of mansion and labyrinth in one, the inclusion of a literal hall of

mirrors scene serves a different function. Placing his sequence in the funhouse early in the text, and with Amadeus Arkham as stand-in for Batman, the scene becomes a ghostly reminder of Dark Age context before Batman enters the true mirror-maze of the asylum. The traces of Moore's and Miller's texts haunt the text, beguiling the reader into thinking the narrative will function in the same way as it had done previously whilst Morrison turns it to his own devices.

What then, is the function of the mirror-maze of the asylum? In Morrison's climactic confrontation, Batman repeats the action of smashing through the walls of the building to find his way out and confront the Joker – a solution borrowed directly from the previous two encounters in the mirror-maze where the walls were made of glass. However, in *Arkham Asylum* this is not a success. Eventually, rather than smashing the mirror image and murdering the Joker (as he does in both Miller's and Moore's versions), Batman leaves the asylum simply by walking out the way he came in. Given the option to avoid the final showdown, the appropriate solution is to walk out of the maze, leaving behind the version of his character that murders his opposite number. Morrison has recreated the scene but has changed the ending. In his words, the Joker has 'broken and remade his old enemy' (Morrison and McKean 2004: 65). For Batman, at least, the space of the mansion, and the space of his mind, is now porous and navigable. In this ending, the external and internal contexts for Morrison's character have been combined. Whether deliberately or, more likely, through the absorption of nineteenth-century gothic literature, Morrison's treatment program for the Batman combines the disease and the cure: the nineteenth-century asylum has become an effective place for treatment because it treats a nineteenth-century faculty psychology model of illness.

Rewriting Poe 2: The Feast of Fools

Rather than the quasi-Lacanian system in which the mirror stage needs to be (violently) rectified, Morrison offers a system where the experience of confrontation can be turned to the purpose of change or development. As he puts it: 'a much richer, more satisfying and more adult way to consider the Batman/Joker dynamic' (2004: 65). Readers need not subscribe to Morrison's self-aggrandising terminology to recognise the functional difference of the narrative scheme. In *Arkham Asylum*, smashing the mirror-world is not an option: the previous iterations of Batman cannot be undone or wholly suppressed, since they will always remain as traces. Instead, the fun-house, or the asylum, or any place that presents a distorted mirror-image of reality, is used as a space where that image can be contained (within a porous boundary) and reversed. Morrison's text requires the traces and remnants of the early Dark Age as he enacts and then disrupts familiar patterns held over from previous readings of similar scenes. Containing the mirror-image within a closed space for the purpose of renewal, Morrison's intention for the space of the mirror-maze or the asylum is Bakhtinian rather than Lacanian.

The asylum is a space where the normal order is reversed in more ways than one. In the nineteenth century, it was a place of treatment that reversed the effects of madness induced by the outside world. Morrison's asylum similarly reverses the 'normal' of Miller and Moore's depictions of Batman, using the scenes they developed. The house functions as a mirror-maze of distorted reflection that Batman must pass through, and the Joker is the fool who guides him. Entering a world that is a mirror image, guided by a clown, Batman has entered a Bakhtinian carnival space that 'revives and renews' (Bakhtin 1984: 11). In a mirror space that renews, the oddly suggestive Tunnel of Love is connected to the Hall of Mirrors. In the world of the carnival, the process of degradation is redemptive and reproductive as it means to 'concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs' (Bakhtin 1984: 16). The Hall of Mirrors leads

directly to the reproductive organ, and yet Arkham, who is unwilling to go through this process, will eventually succumb to life inside the asylum. Batman, on the other hand, is able to pass through the 'reversal reality' and be born again (Morrison and McKean 2004: 65). That is, of course, as long as the reversal reality can be contained within a fixed space with entry and exit points, such as the asylum.

At the carnival, 'coupled with the heroes were their parodies and doublets' suggests Bakhtin (6), just as the Joker and the inhabitants of the asylum double and parody Batman. Although he does not fit Morrison's stated influences of psychotherapy or post-modernism, the specific references to the trickster and the 'feast of fools' in *Arkham Asylum* indicate that Bakhtin is the point of origin for the discourses that inform Morrison's theory of the asylum. Morrison uses the feast of fools to denote a time of reversal, where the lunatics have taken over the asylum. The idea seems to be drawn from Bakhtin's analysis of the celebration as a moment of carnival during medieval life where the world is 'inside out' and reversed. Those entering this world are guided by the clowns or fools who 'stood on the borderline between life and art […] neither eccentrics nor dolts' (Bakhtin 1984: 8). Morrison defines the Joker as a similar 'trickster/guide' for the twisted world of the asylum, guiding the Batman to a place of renewal (Morrison and McKean 2004: 65). Neither eccentric nor dolt, the Joker is capable of inducing some of his wisdom in the Batman, ensuring Batman leaves the asylum rejuvenated. This, again, is exactly in line with the function of the fool and the carnival – the world of the carnival 'denies' the world outside, just as the asylum is closed to outside influence, but 'it revives and renews at the same time' (Bakhtin 1984: 11).

Although the carnival 'denies' the world outside, it does not eradicate it. Rather, the carnival offers a space that reveals the underlying structures of the external world through reversal. Inside the carnival, the external world is maintained though traces that are reversed or disfigured. Once we leave the carnival space, the appearance (and, potentially, the reality) of the outside world is refreshed and altered by the process. Bakhtin's

theorisation of the carnivalesque is thus not limited to reading Morrison's metaphor of the mirror. It can also be applied to a broader analysis of the potential for renewal through reversal that dominates the text. The most effective application analysis is achieved in a comparison between Morrison's text and its most obvious nineteenth-century Romantic precursor: Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether'.

Despite the noted importance of the asylum system to the dark writing of the American Renaissance, few of the works of note deal with the asylum openly. The main exception is 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether', an asylum narrative that responds directly to the concerns of the age. The embedded transatlantic qualities of the asylum are brought to the fore in Poe's story. Like many of Poe's tales, 'Tarr and Fether' is set in France. The European setting connotates both historical and imagined space for his American readership: these implied values of the Old World are central to Poe's writing of the American Romance. Not only is the tale set in the Old World, the asylum itself is a 'fantastic chateau, much dilapidated, and indeed scarcely tenantable through age and neglect' (Poe 1984: 699). Transporting the institution back across the Atlantic, Poe's tale challenges the desire of American system for a new, purpose-built utopia by returning to the source of this desire.

Arkham Asylum follows the narrative pattern of 'Tarr and Fether' almost exactly: both posit a closed space where a feast of reversal takes place. In both texts, the asylum rule is overthrown by its former administrator, who has gone mad. The administrator then presents himself as still sane whilst a 'guest' from the outside is entertained by a banquet and a parade of the asylum's inhabitants. Although in *Arkham Asylum* the role of Dr Cavendish is downplayed in preference to that of the Joker, and there is nothing actually consumed at the Joker's 'feast of fools', the parallels between the two tales are numerous. Both have a transatlantic setting, a set-up dependent on a dual reversal, and a denouement brought about through an intrusion into their closed world. Morrison's repetition of the narrative of 'Tarr and Fether' also replicates the subtext of Poe's tale – a gothic and

humorous scepticism towards the model of treatment without chains and the unchecked role of the superintendent. Whilst Poe shows reservations about the new era for America and its mentally ill, Morrison's caution, in this instance, is directed at the psychologising of the Batman and his villains. His tale is intended to reverse the narrative.

'You're in the real world now and the lunatics have taken over the asylum', the Joker tells Batman as he comes to realise the situation he faces. The line is particularly significant because it enforces the transition from the world outside the asylum to the world inside. When the Joker suggests that the world inside the asylum, the one of ghosts and madness, is the real world, the 'casual reader' Morrison derides might begin to see the extent of his plan for Batman. The Joker, as Dr Ruth explains, is not mad. Rather, he is more suited to urban life than others – a possessor of some kind of 'super sanity'. The reality of this psychological diagnosis is questionable (as is much of the spurious pseudoscience and New Age logic of Morrison's writing) but the relationship to Poe's text is not. As Poe notes in 'Tarr and Fether', 'the dexterity with which [a madman] counterfeits sanity presents, to the metaphysician, one of the most singular problems in the study of mind. When a madman appears thoroughly sane, indeed, it is high time to put him in a straitjacket' (Poe 1984: 713). In Morrison, those whom we believe to be mad are sane; in Poe, those whom we believe to be sane are mad. In both texts, the world as we think we know it is overturned just like the order within the asylum. This reversal is plainly Morrison's goal: 'in the reversal reality of the feast of Fools, it's the arch-villain who does the most good, while the hero is ineffective and lost until the conclusion' (Morrison and McKean 2004: 65). The asylum is a place of reversal, where the mad walk free and the sane are locked up. This is an ideal setting for a turning-about of the Batman.

The parallels between *Arkham Asylum* and 'Tarr and Fether' extend to the importance of the asylum as a closed system. Poe invokes this aspect of treatment by suggesting that whilst the free movement of patients was in operation, 'they were often aroused to a dangerous frenzy by injudicious persons who called there to inspect the house'

(Poe 1984: 701). The interruption or intrusion upon the closed system is the basis of the transition from one treatment method to another. In the tale, this explanation is used to conceal the carnivalesque nature of the asylum for as long as possible, disguising the reversal of the asylum's normal governance. Since the free movement of patients within the asylum and the 'banning of casual visitors' was a fundamental part of the system in America (Rothman 1971: 138), the superintendent's explanation should be the first indication for the clueless narrator of the reversal of the world of the asylum. The function of the asylum system, then, is very similar to the function of the carnival as Bakhtin describes it – both create a 'two-world condition', where the world inside the asylum or the carnival is 'a completely different […] extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations' (1984: 6). The asylum, like the carnival, is extrapolitical in the sense that it offers an alternative to the normal laws of the world outside: a space for renewal (i.e. treatment) and return, rather than punishment.

When the rules are reversed completely and order is turned upside-down, the carnival nature of the asylum is made clear. The final dialectical move is a reversal of a reversal that reveals the carnival. In Poe's text, it is only during the feast of fools that the narrator begins to understand that 'there was much of the bizarre about everything I saw' (Poe 1984: 705). In 'Tarr and Fether', the feast of fools is a literal banquet, organised by the former superintendent who has undergone his own double reversal, moving from (sane) superintendent, to patient, to (mad) superintendent. In *Arkham Asylum*, Dr Cavendish has succumbed to the madness of the house and freed the inmates, but the Joker becomes the host for the feast, as Dave McKean's extraordinary splash page reveals. Morrison's double reversal starts with the pattern of Poe, but with the benefit of a twentieth-century outlook informed by Bakhtinian discourse and previous Dark Age writing, he is able to adapt the double-reversal for a purpose beyond that intended by either writer. The reversal of reversals does not bring about a return to a normal state, but amplifies the reversals, such as in a hall of mirrors, until things are distorted beyond recognition. Here, the feast of fools

announces the start of the process of regeneration that takes place as Batman traverses the mirror-maze of the asylum. Bakhtin writes that 'the utopias of the Renaissance […] were deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit' (Bakhtin 1984: 11). The asylum, too, is an essentially utopian project. Because the world of the asylum is utopian, separate from the outside world, it exists as a space with carnival potential for Poe and Morrison to exploit.

Where both Poe and Morrison demonstrate the carnival potential of the asylum, the point has a broader importance for the Dark Age as a whole. For Bakhtin, the carnival space was enclosed – anything more would represent too much of a challenge to the social order where the point was to renew and refresh. In contrast, The Joker's final words in the text – 'enjoy yourself out there, in the asylum' – confirm that it is not just the Batman that has been changed, but the world itself. In these words, uttered just as Batman is about to re-enter Gotham, the double reversal is made all-consuming. Turning the city into the asylum, a perpetual threshold between fiction and reality is created, suddenly unbound from the closed space of the asylum. At the end of Morrison's narrative, the superhero comic looks toward a newly unreal 'real world', where self-fashioning can take place anywhere. In this change, Morrison offers a glimpse at the world of the next major work of the Dark Age. In Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, considerations of identity become paramount whilst the West works through the clash between global capitalism and resurgent national identity in the wake of very literal collapsing walls of 1989. The end of Morrison's text, with the real world made carnival space, prefigures the beginning of Gaiman's, where all the world will become an unreal place of self-fashioning.

Self-fashioning and self-generation are the key themes of Morrison's text, which sought to remake the Batman. Explaining that the Joker is suited to the madness of urban life, Dr Ruth suggests 'he creates himself each day'. Unlike the Joker, Batman cannot create himself anew each day – his literary form is more static, more dependent on its history than the formless, self-creating Joker. To counter this, Morrison can only treat Batman through fiction, writing a change into his history. In the process, he has instead

effected a fundamental change to the world Batman inhabits. Putting Batman in the asylum, the psychopath written by Miller and Moore is contained and the character is protected. The Dark Age Batman is confined to the carnival space, Gotham is now the asylum, and Batman can return to a world that is not bound by the rules of 'gritty' realism that Moore and Miller had attempted to enforce. The world of the superhero has been turned inside out, and the Batman saved from the problems of his own psychology though a series of dialectical negations.

'Somewhere between the real world and fairy-land': *The Sandman*

Introduction: Commercialisation and Collapse after 1989

When Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* was published towards the end of 1989, the writer who would bear the Dark Age into the next decade had only just begun his comics career. Neil Gaiman was one of several British writers, alongside Morrison, Jamie Delano, and Peter Milligan, who had been hired by Karen Berger to capitalise on the successes of Alan Moore. His first work for DC was the three-issue series *Black Orchid* (1988-89): a comic that reimagined a forgotten hero from the DC pantheon using experimental artwork, literary references, magic, and political thought (a broad eco-feminism, in this case). The story sits neatly alongside *Watchmen*, *Swamp Thing*, and *Animal Man* in the Dark Age catalogue, and pre-empts Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* as Dave McKean's first work for DC (it contains McKean's first versions of Arkham Asylum and Two-Face's silver dollar). Following this minor success, Gaiman's next commission would go on to exceed his first work, and those of his contemporaries, to become the flagship title for Vertigo and the emblem of gothic, literary, adult-oriented fantasy comics.

Before the first issue of *The Sandman* was released, it was already being marketed on the success of the works that preceded it. Early advertisements promised 'a horror-edged fantasy set in the DC Universe', a title character that would have been familiar to many comics readers as another B-list DC hero, and a tagline (mis-)appropriated from T. S. Eliot: 'I will show you terror in a handful of dust' (Bender 1999: 18). In the five years from *Swamp Thing* to *Sandman*, combining horror and gothic aesthetics with literary allusions to update forgotten superhero characters had become method so bankable it was now a

promotional device. During its seven-year run, *Sandman* turned that approach into years of consistent sales and an increased literary status for comics, becoming both the aesthetic touchstone for a new wave of Goth culture and 'the first monthly comic ever to win a literary award' (Bender 1999: 10, 260).

Sandman embodies the changes of the Dark Age, in both cultural and economic terms, but the seven-year publication period presents a new challenge for this study. The works of 1986 were discrete narratives published in relatively short magazine-format runs, and made their biggest impact as collected editions. Following their success, later works were published solely as 'graphic novels', foregoing the magazine format altogether. *Sandman*, on the other hand, has a publication period from 1989-1996 and contains 75 issues. Not only does this change represent another significant shift in the material form of the gothic comic, where collected discrete narratives are no longer a condition for legitimacy, but the period of publication covers global events of some importance. The two are not unrelated. What was promised or threatened by Miller and Moore became, in some senses, a reality for writers in the 1990s. Firstly, the comics industry was legitimised as an adult market, although Christopher Pizzino rightly notes that 'many great works of the era of the graphic novel are best understood […] as complex struggles against the still-prevalent notion of literary maturity (2016: 193). Secondly, the fall of the Soviet Union led to grand proclamations of a new world, although the nature and specifics of this new world differed wildly depending on who was proclaiming it. *Sandman*, as a gothic comic that originates in the same milieu as previous works of the Dark Age but stretches beyond it, reflects these changes. Attending to the ways in which the political, critical and literary content of the Dark Age comics is maintained and altered by *Sandman* into the 1990s will be the focus of this chapter.

Whilst the 1986 *annus mirabilis* texts make their Cold War context a prominent feature, *Sandman,* like *Arkham Asylum*, barely mentions global politics explicitly. The omission is more surprising than in the case of Morrison, since *Sandman* regularly features

narratives set in contemporary America, and is published continuously through the period of Communist dissolution, reconstruction and the subsequent wars in Eastern Europe. Where, then, is the end and aftermath of the Cold War period in *Sandman*? Given that *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* became the determining standard for the superhero comics industry following their publication (Sabin 1993: 93), and these two books are the rationale for DC hiring Gaiman and marketing his work, it is reasonable to question this absence. In response, the argument presented in this chapter will suggest the immediate post-Cold War moment as a necessary background for understanding *Sandman*, despite its absence from the narrative. It places the discourse surrounding contemporary global politics as a key concern among the many that unite the texts of the Dark Age. The impact of the political context is not felt, or examined, as a direct relationship between historical events and individual issues of the serial publication (although an analysis of this type can, and perhaps should, be undertaken). Rather, the politics of the text are manifest in the way *Sandman*, like the other texts of the Dark Age, brings together American gothic writing with varieties of twentieth-century thought.

In fact, I will suggest in this chapter that the relationship between the gothic and the end of the Soviet Union is a feature of the discourse of the end of the Cold War. This discourse is present throughout the Dark Age, but is realised to its fullest in *Sandman.* In Moore and Miller the relationship hinged on the apocalyptic and religious tone of imminent destruction, combined with the threat of a new post-apocalyptic dark age (literally, in *Dark Knight's* blackout) and the failure of the hero in the face of the state. Morrison attempted to exhaust this gothic pessimism as a mode of redemption. Gaiman follows more clearly in Moore's footsteps, displaying a scepticism toward statecraft that expresses itself as a gothic return to earlier narrative forms. The turn back to an earlier period is comparable to contemporary commentators on the events of the period. Examination of several near-concurrent responses reveals a discourse on rationalism, materialism and the legacies of Continental Enlightenment thought claimed and contested by writers observing the long

collapse. In tackling the Enlightenment, this discourse itself frequently evokes the irrational, the mythical and the gothic. *Sandman* both takes from this discourse and contributes to it.

The complex and idiosyncratic philosophy underlying Gaiman's text responds to both the Dark Age and the end of a grand project of Enlightenment politics by making fiction a necessary condition for knowledge. The main character of the text – Dream – binds the disparate narratives of *Sandman* and stands in for all the varieties of unreal, irrational and fictional thought suppressed by post-Enlightenment political and scientific discourse. Quite deliberately on Gaiman's part, this construct also justifies his focus on the recycling of stories and literature in the text, whether these are Greek myths, nineteenth-century Romances or his own work. In each case, the existence of these fictional narratives is shown to be necessary to the creation of lived reality, and often characters face consequences when they forget this. There is a parallel here to the immanent critique proposed for Morrison, which relied on Morrison's script as a paratext explaining the deliberate construction of the world of *Arkham Asylum*. Moving one step further, and possibly influenced by the reception of *Arkham Asylum* as pretentious and overcomplicated, Gaiman deliberately and openly offers his conceptual model within his text. I will argue, in this chapter, that there is a philosophical examination of ontology and epistemology in *Sandman* that is not imposed upon but immanent within Gaiman's work and world: in essence, he has deliberately placed within his text the necessary critical structure for its interpretation.

In a key example of this immanent critical structure, Samuel Delany's introduction to the volume *A Game of You* begins by outlining a relationship between content and form for *Sandman*. Delany suggests the opening of *Game* produces 'two simultaneous worlds […] both highly subjective, one represented by words, one represented by pictures' (Delany 1993). The creation of 'two simultaneous worlds' is a project that recurs throughout *Sandman*, indicating a contextual concern with the remaking of the world in the

post-Cold War era. In Delany's argument, Gaiman replicates for his ontology of two worlds the method of reading words and images simultaneously that comics require. Just as the narrative of *Game* concerns the crossing of the boundary between these two worlds, the text itself cannot exist except when the reader transcends the boundary between words and images to create it. The argument of the two-world ontology holds for the form and content of *Sandman*. As these boundaries are crossed and the text is created, a strange and gothic work takes place. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words: 'the focus of formal energy must be these strange barriers: how spontaneously they spring up and multiply, and what extremes of magic or violence are necessary to breach them' (Sedgwick 1986: 20). The breaching of formal borders creates the comic as whole text, just as the breaching of the borders of the real world creates the narrative of *Game*, and the breaching of political borders created the new world of Gaiman's context.[26] Magic or spectrality, the revelation of the imaginary introduced at the moment of border-crossing, becomes the focus of Gaiman's text. 'The beginning', Dream remarks early in *Game*, was when 'something travelled from one state of existence to another' (1993: v.5, #32).[27]

Sandman is therefore a gothic text haunted by the legacies of Enlightenment philosophy and its practical applications in twentieth-century Communist and liberal statecraft. Reading it in this way, the rationale behind Gaiman's return to the mode of gothic fiction is revealed. This chapter proceeds by first examining the context for *Sandman's* production, and then working through the major themes of Gaiman's large body

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[26] Julia Round has explored the gothic assemblage of comics in considerable depth, and my argument here is shaped by her work – as is my reading of Jodey Castricano later in the chapter. Round considers the assemblage of comics, reading the gutter as a Derridaean crypt: an 'inheritance and a legacy', looking backwards and forwards (Round 2014: 100-101).

[27] Like many comics of the Dark Age, *Sandman* also presents a problem for referencing. Its most widely available form is the collected paperbacks, which run to ten volumes. These are not paginated, and whilst all volumes make note of the issues they collect, some volumes collect issues in narrative order rather than publication order. In this chapter, the parenthetical reference will give the date of publication for the paperback volume, the number of the volume, and the specific issue number from which the quotation is taken.

of work under the *Sandman* title to expose and explore these similarities. In particular, I will argue that Gaiman aimed to challenge the divisions between reality and imagination in the post-Enlightenment period, re-evaluating the persistence of an imaginary or spectral quality he saw as having been written out of the world by empiricism, materialism and rationalist political administration. From this re-evaluation, Gaiman moves toward a new politics of identity as the most promising channel for political change after the failures of Communist statecraft. This new politics marks another change to the Dark Age as Gaiman, in line with the discourse of identity in the culture wars of the 1990s, tries to address some of the erasures of marginalised positions within the gothic that the Dark Age had perpetuated. His text, I will argue, should be read as product of the combination of American gothic writing, Dark Age comics, and theoretical responses to the post-Cold War moment of the 1990s.

Sandman's Intellectual Context

From 1989 onwards, the extended collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it a debate over the course of history that reverberates through the art of the time. One of the earliest, and most influential, claims on the discourse of the Soviet dissolution was Francis Fukuyama's article 'The End of History'. Fukuyama, in 1989, wrote that 'what we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War […] but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (1989: 4). Fukuyama's argument was pervasive, and his tone of finality resonated with the apocalyptic attitude towards the Cold War nuclear threat and the Millennium millenarianism that had preceded the opening up of Eastern Europe. However, despite its prominence, his proclamation of a now unchallenged dominant Western ideology was not on stable theoretical ground, and much political theory of the time took the form, explicitly or not, of responses to Fukuyama.

John Gray, writing in 1991, remarked that:

> the lesson of the Gorbachev period is that, so powerful was the hold on
> Western opinion of Enlightenment illusion that it could not perceive that
> the project of reforming the Soviet system, one of the Enlightenment's
> most stupendous constructions, was itself only an ephemeral illusion of
> rationalism. (1995: 31)

For Gray, the events of 1989 and 1991 proved false the 'French Enlightenment's vision of a universal human civilisation' based on a common human essence. Ultimately, the breakdown of the USSR was brought about when assertions of national identity were able to overtake commitment to the soviet or the union (particularly, Gray highlights, the final blow being resurgent Russian nationalism). Thus, this piece of history is a demonstration of the importance of local identity based on region, history and cultural attachment above the unifying power of any innate human quality. Although there are obvious counterarguments that would posit economic circumstances, or a variety of other factors, as more important than local identity, Gray's point is worth noting for targeting both 'sides' of the Iron Curtain. The idea of a human quality that can transcend local identity animated both Marxist states (in Marx's *The German Ideology*, the concept is fundamental and often translated as 'species-being') and the liberalism that became Woodrow Wilson's 'rationalist order conceived in the New World' for Europe. Gray's argument was that the resurgence of nationalism in the post-1989 moment disproved both liberal and communist ideologies competing for dominance in Europe, rather than asserting one over the other. 'It certainly never heralded the end of history', he writes of the events of the period (1995: 33).

Gray would go on to write, in 1994, that 'the strategic consequence of the end of the Cold War has been […] the return to nineteenth-century policies and modes of thinking in the United States' (1995: 35). His comment gives the indication that there is a rationale

underpinning a similar return in fictional works of the period, as both search for an alternative to the failed philosophies of the twentieth century. Gray's discovery of a legacy of the nineteenth century at the end of the twentieth has a parallel in the contemporary work of Jacques Derrida, although I suspect both writers might take issue with the comparison. In *Specters of Marx*, from 1994, Derrida asserted the importance of haunting, the spectral, and a return to the nineteenth century, beginning with the *Communist Manifesto's* famous opening statement that 'a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism' (2006: 2). 'At a time when a new world disorder attempts to install its neocapitalism and neoliberalism,' he writes, 'no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all Marx's ghosts' (2006: 46).

Derrida's response to the neoliberal claim of the 'end of history' proceeded from Marxism's role in critical theory and political thought – a role it retains despite the apparent ideological victory for liberalism. His argument is that articles like Fukuyama's, which Derrida reads (somewhat unfairly) as an attempt at a total erasure of Marxism, only affirm the continuing relevance of Marx. The spectral has a necessary role for Derrida's thesis. For a philosopher who is best known for his ahistorical, synchronic criticism, the attempt to recover Marx and rebut Fukuyama's understanding of 1989-91 presents a problem. To work through a wholly historical methodology and a specific historical event, Derrida must develop a sense of the historical without denying his own philosophical project. The ghost or spectre allows this move, being simultaneously a symbol of the historic past and of something returning to have bearing on the present. The ghost can move through time to surprise us, being relevant in the present wherever it appears. 'Haunting is historical […] but it is not *dated*', he writes, indicating a method by which the ideas from previous eras can maintain a sense of the past without being tied to the era in which they are produced (2006: 3).

History and ideology, then, are themes with currency and debated meaning at the time of *Sandman's* writing. Even from the very brief overview above, the themes of the

ghost, the New World, and the end of an era, the understanding of history, and the return to the nineteenth century are only some of several elements in *Sandman* that suggest that Gaiman was responding to global events in a comparable way to Derrida and Gray. The comparatively sudden irrelevance of a world considered as a contest between two states, and the concomitant necessity for a new understanding of the nature of the world presented a new problem to be worked through. To do so, Fukuyama appropriated Hegel's dialectic for 'The End of History' to prove the dominance of liberal ideology, Derrida sought to assert Marx's critical method in a new, haunted form in response to Fukuyama, and Gray attempted to disprove these two by denying the Enlightenment assumptions that underpin both. In each case, there is a sense of a fundamental change to thought caused by the events of history.

Gaiman's work of the period also emphasises a shifting current of thought and a return to the haunted and the irrational, suggesting it should be read as a response to the change of historical circumstances. In *Sandman*, the dialectic narrative content of the Dark Age, beginning in the 1986 comics and carried over into *Arkham Asylum*, is absent. Given the changed circumstances of production, the dialectic of individual and state, or two competing sides, was perhaps a less viable option than it had been for Miller or Morrison. Instead, the narrative denounces the viability of any philosophical system that does not account for the purely invented, creating a place where the rational and the material are consistently challenged and undermined. Gaiman begins both *Sandman* and his novel *American Gods* where Morrison ended *Arkham Asylum*, with the main character exiting from a prison into a new and changed world. As the character makes the journey across the border into the new world, the world becomes 'unreal' and the imaginary becomes real: the two blend and begin to occupy the same space. Throughout the narrative, the reader discovers hauntings and spectral phenomena that reiterate forgotten pasts, promise imagined futures, or expose the human mind. In Gaiman's words, 'I created an America that was entirely imaginary, in which *Sandman* could take place. A delirious, unlikely place

out beyond the edge of the real' (Gaiman 2005b). As the rational thought of the Enlightenment faces the 'end of history', Gaiman takes the reader to the 'edge of the real'.

With modes of Enlightenment thought facing dispersion as local and historically-constructed identity overtakes the narrative of grand ideological difference, it is no surprise that *Sandman* differs from its predecessors in its focus on the imaginary, the historic and on identity rather than on global politics. The change can be read in part as a continuation of Morrison's project to return comics to their 'unreal' literary and cultural history. The collapse of the USSR and the response of Fukuyama to this event revealed for both Derrida and Gray that the twentieth-century vision of the world as a process where competing ideologies drive history and one will triumph was false, and their challenges aim at revealing the flaws in the assumptions of the Cold War ideological narrative. In Gaiman, the movement between the 'real' and the 'imagined' does exactly this work. The spectral traces that fit in neither category destabilise the binary, and reveal the narrative as exactly that – a fiction. There is consistency between Gaiman's approach and the other writers of the Dark Age that is worth noting here. After their respective attempts at exhausting the superhero genre, and in the new world beyond rational statecraft, all turned to long-form narratives that tested the boundary between the real and the imagined, building stories that took their cues from the history of genre fiction rather than political and social commentary. The 1990s would see all four major writers creating longer series in this mode: as well as *Sandman*, the 1990s produces Miller's *Sin City*, Moore's *Promethea*, and Morrison's *The Invisibles*.

The move towards long-form genre-writing of all four writers makes the 1990s seems less like an 'end of history' and more like a natural continuation of the work of 1989, for Dark Age comics at least. Similarly, for Fredric Jameson, Fukuyama's use of the dialectic to suggest an endpoint to history appeared especially egregious. Jameson refutes totally the millenarian discussion of 'the end of this or that' of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, he favours an outlook that understands his contemporary moment, including

the ideas of an end themselves, as an articulation of capitalism and its cultural products that can be traced back to the early twentieth-century, 'if not, indeed, […] the even older romanticism' (Jameson 1991: 1-3). Jameson challenged ideas that eschewed long-term economic considerations, highlighting the way in which Derrida's move toward the gothic and Gray's challenge to the Enlightenment foundation of classical Marxist assumptions look like forms of conservatism. Jameson's response to *Specters of Marx* takes aim at the modern (or 'postcontemporary') tendency to disavow class and economics by claiming the simplification and orthodoxy of class as a 'vulgar Marxism'. The rejection of class is encouraged by a system with 'a vested interest in distorting the categories whereby we think class, and in foregrounding its current rival conceptualities of gender and race, which are far more adaptable to purely liberal solutions (in other words, solutions that satisfy the demands of ideology, it being understood that in concrete social life the problems remain equally intractable)' (Jameson 1999: 47).

Jameson's criticism should be kept in mind when reading *Sandman*. One of the major changes to the Dark Age, in response to the new circumstances of the post-Cold War moment, is Gaiman's turning away from the politics of the early Dark Age to consider gender and sexual identity – particularly in the second half of *Sandman's* publication run. Occurring at the moment of the accelerated collapse of a global binary position, promoted by many as the conclusive demonstration of the failures of the Marxist theory of history, Gaiman's challenge to binary categories of identity is inseparable from his focus on spectrality, localised identity, and the exposure of common sense empiricism. Jameson's point is therefore a valuable demonstration of the limit to Gaiman's approach, and that of many other writers in the same historical moment, whose willingness to return to earlier models or focus on identity abandoned large-scale change in favour of the personal. However, it does not wholly deny the value of the text as a method of challenging ideology. Not only is Gaiman's turn a partial attempt at correcting the record of the early Dark Age to abandon the marginalised, there is a purpose behind the challenge to common sense in

Gaiman's work that Jameson validates in his own theory of the dialectic. Jameson's argument that the dialectic works toward the 'perversity whereby a commonsense empiricist view of reality is repudiated and undermined' (2009: 59) is essential to keep in mind when considering the radical qualities of Gaiman – a writer who consistently challenges common sense and empirical reality by highlighting the inherent inconsistencies in the division of real and imaginary.

The mention of Fredric Jameson, the argument for the conservative qualities of 'postcontemporary' thought, and the Dark Age's turn towards genre fiction inevitably leads to an emerging spectre of 'postmodernism' for the Dark Age in the 1990s. A concept that several of the theorists mentioned here have engaged with along different lines, postmodernism in its most generally defined form would be the easiest categorisation for writing that looks for multiple local identities or points of view, questions common-sense epistemologies, and moves beyond literary allusion and quotation to the enactment of genre conventions. However, whilst there is an undeniable influence of high postmodern literature on the comics of the 1980s, as I demonstrated in my chapter on *Watchmen*, it is important to note Gray's and Derrida's separate assertions of a nineteenth-century background to the arguments presented here. Furthermore, where both suggest a return to the politics of the nineteenth-century, Jodey Castricano (2001) has demonstrated that Derrida's aesthetic in *Specters* also has origins in the American gothic.

Gaiman's conservatism, then, is of a similar shade to Moore's, Gray's, and Derrida's. In their opposition to utopian statecraft and their challenge to rational and materialist approaches, these arguments may appear similar to what has been called postmodernism, but they have their origins in an earlier moment. The use of the spectral and the uncanny to destabilise and question the principles of empirical knowledge and rational statecraft is shared between the Dark Age of comics, critical responses to the end of the USSR, and the American Dark Romance. As the Dark Age moves into the 1990s, these ideas are brought to the fore in *Sandman*. For political theorists like Eric Voegelin,

Moore's primary influence in this matter, and John Gray, the line of political thought that questions the Enlightenment utopia can be traced back to a nineteenth-century consideration that the project for the development of humanity is little more than an act of faith. In Hawthorne's terms: 'as regards human progress […] let them believe in it who can' (Hawthorne 1983: 847). After the failure of the planned utopia, the spectre of a gothic, anti-rational, pessimist form of critique remerges.

Sunless Lands: Gaiman's Gothic Geography

The relationship between shifting nation-states and a change in political discourses surrounds *Sandman*, and produces a gothic concern with the collapse of borders. My reading of Gaiman will proceed from this context to propose what Jodey Castricano terms a 'contradictory topography', or geography for the text. Castricano suggests for Derrida 'a writing practice that, like certain Gothic conventions, generates its uncanny effects through the production of […] a "contradictory topography of inside outside"' (2001: 6). A 'contradictory topography' speaks to a concern with the disruption of surface, a layout where all is not what it seems. The idea returns as Castricano goes on to write that 'the affinity between Derrida and Poe […] can be thought through the notion of the cross(ing), the border, and the threshold, all of which draw attention to themselves as dynamic sites of contamination, as uncanny loci of (often contradictory) translations' (Castricano 2001: 100). Castricano's reading of *Spectres* as a gothic text places it into the lineage of gothic theory that can be traced back to Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's spatial metaphor of the Gothic. For Sedgwick, the act of geographical boundary-breaking and border-crossing is directly related to the Gothic tropes of live burial and the unspeakable, creating a genre convention so specific that the narrative content of the Gothic text can be used as a structure for its interpretation (for example, Sedgwick 1986: 12). The value of these readings is that they reveal, in both Derrida and the American gothic writers, a political content to the ideas of

haunting, burial in the crypt, and the imaginary. The collapse of borders, of walls, is a gothic staple as well as a symbol of political revolution.

Border crossings are immediately relevant to the consideration of a text that begins with the transcending of magical imprisonments. Reading *Sandman* in search of borders, particularly those created by the consolidation of the political and the gothic, reveals much about the internal landscape of the text. In previous Dark Age texts, it was relatively simple to discern the divisions of space and time made by the text: *Arkham Asylum* neatly walls off its carnival space from the world outside and *Watchmen* presents an alternative present, splitting from our own timeline at a point in the 1950s. *Sandman*, by contrast, presents a world that is simultaneously comprised of concrete and recognisable historical moments but is temporally so near infinite that the passage of time cannot be read as it would in a traditional narrative. Instead, the reader moves from moment to moment in an infinite historical space. Similarly, location obtains little concrete relevance. In *Sandman,* the narrative shifts between the interior, imagined world of its characters, the world as material fact, and the world that might exist beyond either of these two realms. Furthermore, Gaiman disregards any need to explain the existence of these things. Unlike the science-fiction tone of early superhero comics that was preserved in some form in *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, in *Sandman* the existence of a fiction is enough to constitute its 'real' existence and its inclusion in the text as fact – if fact is the correct term.[28]

Sandman presents to the reader what appears to be a complex and internally coherent ontology, yet it simply inserts the world of the human into its grander scheme of fantasy. The world-as-we-know-it is subject to and part of the universe of the Endless – the

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[28] Given the effort in Gaiman's writing to problematise the idea of a consistent division between fact and fiction, some flexibility is required in the terminology used throughout this chapter. Most commonly I use 'imagination', or 'the imaginary' as the most etymologically and semantically appropriate term to cover a variety of ideas that are either made contiguous by Gaiman or appear to operate at broadly the same level within the text, including magic, dreams, fictions, concepts, gods, etc. By contrast, 'reality' or 'the actual' refers to the set of concepts that a typical post-Enlightenment society might accept as 'real' – the political and material world of the text's reader.

beings that represent the ongoing processes of life, including Destiny, Destruction and Dream. These beings are both signifiers for the physical process *and* for the human concept that unites the discrete instances of this process – Dream is the lord or controller of dreaming as physical activity (without his presence, dreaming cannot occur) and he is the idea or conception of dreaming as a universal or creative function. Making empirical reality (dreaming as event) contiguous with the mental conception (dreaming as signifier), the gap between what we might term as 'imagination' and 'reality' is effaced. The two coexist on equal terms in a space that overarches both, emphasising only the artificiality of their division. In the simplest demonstration of this setting, in *A Game of You* Barbie asks 'is this real? Or is it just my imagination?' and the Cuckoo replies 'If you tell me what the difference is, I might be able to tell you' (Gaiman 1993: v.5, #33). In the world of *Sandman*, both geographically and philosophically, there is no difference between the conceptual and the physical.

In the world of *Sandman*, imagination and reality coexist on equal footing in a way that links Gaiman to earlier forms of fantastic writing. The character Barbie is recognisable as a human inhabitant of New York in *Game*, yet her question quoted above is provoked by her travel to another realm. This realm is understood to be simultaneously her own imagination, populated by her childhood memories, and a world ultimately not under her control that can be travelled to and altered by other human and non-human characters. This 'reality' is, in any meaningful sense, both what she makes of it and how it is shaped by others. The division between her imagination and a 'real world' is made problematic, however, since the two operate very similarly. Barbie's imagination-world, like New York, is a space that is both inhabited and shaped by others and shaped for the individual by their memories and internal life. Clive Barker's introduction to the early collection *The Doll's House* identifies this quality of Gaiman's writing: 'in these narratives, the whole world is haunted and mysterious. There is no solid status quo, only a series of relative realities, personal to each of the characters'. He closes his account of the text with a laudatory

comparison on this point: 'one of the finest writers in this […] mode is Edgar Allen Poe' (Barker 1991).

Gaiman has written about his affection for Poe, supporting the comparison between the two that Barker makes (Gaiman, 'Some Strangeness…'). However, Barker's comparison would be instructive even with Gaiman's acknowledgement of Poe's influence. By uniting Gaiman and Poe through the particular creation of a 'set of relative realities', he highlights a method that is vital to reading both the American Romance and the changes Gaiman made to the Dark Age model. The idea of a similar conception of reality in the American gothic tradition, where the relationship between the individual imagination and the external world is made a feature of the geography of the narrative, is verifiable from textual evidence. In the nineteenth-century it is not Poe but Hawthorne, theorist of the Romance, who develops this theme most explicitly:

> Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility—is a medium most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guests […] Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here without affrighting us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene to excite surprise, were we to look about us and discover a form, beloved, but gone hence, now sitting quietly in a streak of this magic moonshine, with an aspect that would make us doubt whether it had returned from afar, or had never once stirred from our fireside. (Hawthorne 1983: 149)

A 'neutral territory' is created by Hawthorne – a place where familiar space is changed to incorporate the imaginary on equal terms. A reader familiar with Gaiman must admit the description could quite easily be of a scene from any number of his works. The

use of moonlight as the medium to enter the space between the real and imaginary is directly replicated in *A Game of You,* where Thessaly must 'draw down the moon' – utilise its inherent magical properties for her own purpose. She does so in order to gain access to the shared world Barbie has created, a world that is both her imagination and a tangible place that other characters can enter. Hawthorne's moonlit cosmology might also remind the reader of *Arkham Asylum,* where ghosts are able to enter through the porous boundaries between the real and imaginary – the asylum, for example. If this is the case, it is possible to trace a shared idea that validates the account of the Dark Age put forward so far. Since *Arkham Asylum* and *Sandman* were first published in the same year – 1989 – their similarity to Hawthorne cannot be simply a case of mutual influence but stems from the combination of a reading of American gothic writing and a response to the early Dark Age. Morrison turned to features of fantastic and gothic writing as a way of reintroducing the magical and imaginary content on which superhero comics were built. Gaiman's work is noticeably similar, but with a geography more obviously reflective of the politics of his moment of writing: a uniting of the two discrete worlds of the magical and the real.

Considering the philosophical work of the Gaiman's comic, and its origins in the American Romance, unveils a structuralist epistemology for the text. An understanding of the world in terms of opposed but coherent parts of a whole is fundamental to the *Sandman* universe: Death explains to Hazel in the spin-off *Time of Your Life* that life itself 'is probably contrasts. Light and shadow' (Gaiman 2014: 217). Once this epistemology is recognised, there is evidence to suggest the idea was immanent throughout the Dark Age. Two-Face's silver dollar and Rorschach's mask demonstrate a predilection for items where two distinct sides, 'never mixing', comprise one whole. Following on from the prominence of the silver dollar in *Arkham Asylum* and *Black Orchid*, in the *Sandman* collection *Brief Lives* the two-sided coin is turned from object to conceptual metaphor that describes the Endless and the world they inhabit. Destruction, a member of the Endless who has abandoned his duties and chosen to live in the human world, explains his place in the world

as part of 'a two-sided coin: destruction is needed. Nothing new can exist without destroying the old'. The exchange that follows this comment forces Dream to confront this way of thinking:

> DESTRUCTION: Our sister defines life, just as despair defines hope, or
> desire defines hatred, or as destiny defines freedom.
> DREAM: And what do I define, by this theory of yours?
> DESTRUCTION: Reality, perhaps?
> (1994: v.7, #44)

Having lived through the Enlightenment and twentieth century in the company of humans, it is perhaps to be expected that Destruction's 'theory' proposes an interpretation of the Endless drawn from philosophical thought. His theory is most clearly a simple Saussurian binary, in which opposing concepts necessarily define each other and each concept is reliant upon its opposition in order to have meaning. In his explanation, however, the theory becomes a reality. The Endless are not simply metaphorical representations of processes in the universe, but substantive beings upon whom the processes of the universe depend. In this case, and in line with Gaiman's goal of undermining the division between concept and object, epistemology becomes ontology. Destruction's proposal for understanding the Endless is not theoretical, but material.

If the actual and imaginary define each other but co-exist in the same space, as two sides of the same whole, Gaiman's work problematises reality by making it conceptual. In direct accord with his two-world gothic geography, the coin metaphor leads to an investigation of the ways in which reality is constructed by imagination. According to the structuralist philosophy that underlies his universe, Gaiman's work appears to be replicating the theoretical process of deconstruction – the use of the Saussurian binary to challenge modes of thought – in a fictional world. By embodying concepts like death or destruction as characters, Gaiman remakes the deconstructionist challenge to

Enlightenment epistemologies as a fictional ontology. The process is described in more traditionally theoretical terms by Jameson, in his response to *Spectres of Marx*. There, Jameson suggests that spectrality challenges the belief in the stability of reality (of Being, or ontology), causing it to waver visibly and invisibly, as when we say 'barely perceptible', wanting to mean by that "perceptible" and "imperceptible" all at once'. The result, Jameson explains, is that spectrality tells us not to rely on the living present (Jameson 1999: 38-9). *Brief Lives*, I argue, does the same. The 'living present' (the 'real', the Actual) is defined by the existence of Death and Dream, who are incorporated into a totality that then denies anything like the 'living present' except as a construct of thought in opposition to the gothic figures who are caught on the other side of this pairing. The gothic or fantastic qualities of the writing explicitly deny a purely material ontology, or a purely conceptual epistemology. The two are two sides of one whole.

In Hawthorne, anticipating Jameson, light and visibility become the prominent examples for discussing the instability of reality, challenging the empiricist and scientific focus on the stability of sensory perception. Hawthorne's use of moonlight as the medium for Romance is enhanced by his reminiscence in 'The Custom House' that 'he was happier while straying through the gloom of […] sunless fantasies' (Hawthorne 1983: 156). Again, the shade between being and not-being receives a spatial metaphor. Moonlight as the medium for the mingling of actual and imaginary is explained in Hawthorne's sentence – in an overtly gothic construction, darkness is the place of the imagination. The converse to this, presumably, is that the light is the realm of the senses. Moonlight – a sunless light-in-darkness – is the illumination of fiction and conjoins the imaginary and the empirical, creating the space for the Romance. The image from *The Scarlet Letter* is repeated in *The Marble Faun*, strengthening the opposition between sunless light and sunlight. There, Hawthorne describes a room with:

> windows closed with shutters, or deeply curtained, except one, which
> was partly open to a sunless portion of the sky, admitting only from a
> high upward that partial light which, with its strongly marked contrast of
> shadow, is the first requisite towards seeing objects pictorially.
> (Hawthorne 1983: 885)

Sunless light and shadow, it seems, are vital to the creation of fiction *because* they reveal the fictional, constructed or fantastic nature of the world.

If sunless light acts to destabilise empirical reality, to reveal the fictions and phantoms that inhabit our world, Hawthorne has pre-empted the answer to the question Death poses in *Preludes & Nocturnes*, the first *Sandman* collection: 'I find myself wondering about humanity. Their attitude to my sister's gift is so strange. Why do they fear the sunless lands?' (1991: v.1, #8). 'Sunless lands' in Dream's words is a geographical metaphor for the realm of Death, but the question of why humans fear death is not as facile as it might appear. Dream knows what humanity does not: that the sunless lands exist as a counterpart to the well-lit world, and that dying, as the moving from one realm to the other, is not something to be afraid of. As characters, as realms, and as concepts, Dream and Death are very close (see, for example, Gaiman 1992: v.4, #21). Because this is so, the sunless lands of Death should be both familiar and fundamental to the human experience: in one sense, the move to *a* sunless land happens every night. If Death defines life and Dream defines reality, the sunlit world – the waking, empirical world humans profess to inhabit – depends on the existence of the concepts and processes humanity appears to fear.

A fearful response to death appears to stem from a lack of understanding regarding the necessity of its existence, or its existence at all. Fearing Death is incomprehensible to Dream because he has the benefit of seeing existence under the structuralist epistemology-ontology that means that life depends on Death. The two-world ontology, when it is revealed, makes the sunless lands the realm of the gothic imagination, but also has the power to remove the fear associated with the gothic. As Hawthorne suggests, under

moonlight ghosts may enter 'without affrighting us. It would be too much in keeping with the scene'. The realm of Death and Dream is hardly pleasant, but Gaiman often portrays characters as accepting of death once they realise their continued existence in the other plane: 'So. I'm dead. Now what?' asks Harry, just after pleading 'not yet' in the final moments of his life (1991: v.1, #8). I would suggest, then, that Gaiman's presentation of the ordinary or common-sense reaction of humanity to death is not simply the fear of death itself: it is a fear that arises from the revelation of the two-world ontology. Death, Dream, moonlight, the sunless lands, haunting, the gothic, the uncanny, the fantastic, fiction – however we term or recognise an encounter between the actual and imaginary, the process reveals the construction of the world and focuses our attention on the instability of the artificial divide between empirical 'reality' and imagination. Like Morrison's haunted asylum, it is the porous boundary between the two states where this gothic encounter with the instability of 'reality' can occur.

The fear produced by the discovery that the world is not simply composed of a verifiable, empirical reality unveils the underlying political content to Gaiman's ontology. This content is prefigured in the Romance by Hawthorne's mention of the ghost. Ghosts or spectres, in Derridean terms, are signifiers for both imagined futures and the legacy of a historical past: political abstracts impacting upon the present. The fear associated with the discovery of ghosts then becomes a fear of the unseen thoughts and concepts that structure the world: it is as though conceptual hegemony, a central feature of Derrida's theory of haunting in *Spectres* (2006: 46), has been revealed through the two-world ontology. Ideas become spectral presences that cannot be fully eradicated by a dominant philosophical discourse, and threaten to destabilise a known reality when they recur. The most obvious example of the revelation offered by the two-world ontology is found in the 'common sense' of any political or economic system, a common sense that is the site of ideological struggle as it presents itself as a natural state of affairs in order to ensure the dominance of the bloc to which its ideas are secured (Hall, Morley and Chen 1996: 43-44). In doing so, it

precludes thinking of alternative possible worlds. A challenge to this common sense can then be mounted from the revelation that common sense is composed of the same ghosts that affright us: the 'traces' of history, philosophy and prejudice that, when recognised, deny its status as immutable. In other words, the fear attendant to haunting is connected to the necessity for dominant power blocs to repress certain ideas, particularly those that might reveal the power bloc as something other than the 'natural' state of affairs

The discovery of a haunting – a ghostly idea that threatens the stability of common sense – then offers a counter to the situation of conceptual hegemony. If we discover a space where ghosts may enter without affrighting us, we discover a place where common sense can be wrong, and current philosophical and political models rethought. Stories or fictional worlds present themselves as the space where revolutions and utopias can be imagined: a new politics must be constructed in the sunless lands before it is brought into the light. There is a premonition of Gaiman's ontology in *The Blithedale Romance*, where the space for political change becomes the imaginary, forced into contact with an empirical reality:

> Drawing nearer to Blithedale […] I indulged in a hundred odd and
> extravagant conjectures. Either there was no such place as Blithedale,
> nor ever had been, not any brotherhood of thoughtful labourers, like what
> I seemed to recollect there, or else it was all changed during my absence.
> It had been nothing but dream work and enchantment.
> […]
> These vagaries were of the spectral throng so apt to steal out of an
> unquiet heart. They partly ceased to haunt me, on my arriving at a point
> whence, through the trees, I began to catch glimpses of Blithedale farm.
> That surely was something real. (Hawthorne 1983: 811-12)

Blithedale is revealed here for what it truly is, a place comprised of a conjoining of two substances. It is both 'something real' – an empirical object with a reassuringly

familiar location – and a conjecture or piece of dream work, a projection of an ideal community. Blithedale as Coverdale experienced it, as he appears to realise in this passage, is both what it was and what he imagined it to be. The projection, the imagination that composes our experience, is revealed here in the gothic language of ghosts and haunting. The value Hawthorne places on the ghost is its power to remind us of the role of imagination – dream work or enchantment – as an essential part of the political and experiential life.

The political content of Hawthorne's ghosts is revealed further in Castricano's reading of *The House of the Seven Gables*, which she describes as an example of the 'economies of haunting'. In this reading, the haunting of the house by both Maule (as curse) and Pyncheon (as ghost) 'explores both personal and national guilt predicated upon capitalism' (Castricano 2001: 11). Haunting, for Castricano, is an act that both reveals the power structures behind the observed world of the house and its inhabitants, and presents these power structures as thought-forms, in the same realm as the imaginary. In Castricano's terms, a 'staging of the cultural imaginary in which the trope of the living-dead and their return from the grave materialises a certain unpaid symbolic debt' (2001: 15). The material and immaterial are brought into focus by ghosts. Haunting (dis-)embodies the fears that Hawthorne's text confronts: the legacy of European aristocratic social structures, nascent American forms of land-owner capitalism, and the promise of hidden wealth in the frontier.

Hawthorne's conjoining of the legacy of European aristocracy in America to the potential wealth of westward expansion in *House* marks a key point of the temporal-spatial-spectral unity so important for both periods. Furthermore, it confirms Castricano's reading that, in America, the gothic text can become a glimpse of the future (2001: 15). Going further still, Hawthorne indicates that the oncoming future renders humanity as ghosts haunting the present: 'Nothing gives a sadder sense of decay than this loss or suspension of the power to deal with unaccustomed things, and to keep up with the swiftness of the

passing moment […] We are less than ghosts, for the time being, whenever this calamity befalls us' (1983: 490). The ghost is that which haunts, immaterially, the present moment, maintaining its relevance and always threatening its eventual return. In contrast, to be temporally left behind renders one 'less than ghosts', forgotten as the material and immaterial world seeks, in the name of progress, to abandon the legacies that haunt it. The ghost, as potential revenant, is futuristic in that it keeps up, in some way, with the march of time and change. If this is the ghost's political content, of course rational progress must deny it. To do otherwise would deny the immutability of the current state of affairs. Furthermore, if ideas from the past maintain currency and can return, this might deny the idea of progress at all.

Gaiman understands the importance of this implication. In 'Three Septembers and a January', Joshua Norton, self-appointed Emperor of America from 1859-80, proclaims that 'I am a rational man and I do not believe in ghosts' (1993: v.6, #31). In Enlightened America, rationality reigns, not the superstition of the Old World and the gothic. Norton's point, unfortunately, is undermined by the context – the reader of *Sandman* is aware of the existence of not only ghosts, but the entire realm of the imagination that does not conform to Norton's rational worldview. In fact, Norton's emphasis on his rationality performs a neat dialectical turn. In turning down Desire's attempt at 'bringing back a dead man to offer Norton the pleasures of the world', Norton confirms that he inhabits the realm of the imaginary. Desire recognises that 'he's no king. He's a crazy man with a cockeyed fantasy'. In this way, Gaiman's ghosts carry a political point in line with Hawthorne's: what is in question here is not the existence of the ghost, but the values of an America that steadfastly denies the ghost in the name of progress. The act of denying the ghost affirms that which the denial seeks to efface: that the realm of the imaginary has a role in the construction of the world.

In *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne's focus is turned from the inherited debts of the past to the possibility of imagining a better future, but he carries the ghost with him as

the symbol of the imaginary. Just as the past exercises its legacy as ghosts in the present, the present becomes a ghost in the imagined spaces of the future. Hollingsworth, who is subsumed by his desire to build a better world, appears as a gothic monster throughout the text, but 'unlike all other ghosts, his spirit haunted an edifice, which, instead of being time-worn, and full of storied love, and joy, had never yet come into existence' (Hawthorne 1983: 680). Hollingsworth is a monster, but the reformatory he is building will become the mansion he will haunt – the pursuit of utopian ideals makes him monstrous not only in the present, but in the future.

Up to this point in the Dark Age, the spirit of Hollingsworth has haunted the texts under consideration as the monster of philanthropy – a precursor to the Batman-type superhero so committed to a cause in the face of prevailing opposition he becomes monstrous to the sight of others, even other social reformers. In the context of their relationship to Hawthorne, there is an affinity here between the Dark Age writers: all seek to use the fictional world of the text as the space to imagine revolutionary action, and predict the consequences faced by those who take on that work. Yet, the quotation from *Blithedale* reveals that the points where they diverge also come from readings inherent in Hawthorne's text. The idea of Hollingsworth as ghost, haunting a mansion yet-to-be-built but also part of a revolutionary social experiment, can encompass both the active political insurrection of Miller's Batman and the 'imaginary' of Gaiman. Yet, in *A Game of You*, Foxglove asks the Cuckoo, posing as Judy: 'are you a ghost?'. Judy replies: 'Something like that. A ghost, or a dream. I don't know. Does it matter?' (1993: v.5, #33). Where Miller's Batman plays off the fear he provokes and turns it to his cause, in *Sandman* there is no difference between the ghost and the dream, both are simply facets of an imaginary. Gaiman's purpose, it seems, is to show the two sides of the same coin – the point where imagination engenders, creates, and therefore can also undermine, political reality. In the same way, Hollingsworth's politics will, in the future, haunt and perhaps undermine the reformatory he builds.

Gaiman's relationship to the Romance therefore draws out a political critique immanent within the fantastic. The fantastic is political when it threatens the stability of a state that relies on the appropriation of empiricism and common sense to its hegemony. The pattern has been true throughout the life of the genre. As Dinah Birch notes: 'a Gothic refusal of sense in favour of something wilder and more disorderly becomes a seductive option for those who mistrust the establishment. Many early Gothic texts reflect this pattern' (2016: 35). Also reflecting this pattern, Gaiman problematises empirical 'reality' by indicating the role of the imaginary in constructing this reality. Rather than experience the world as-it-is through the senses, its inhabitants construct their world from the inter-relation of the real and the imagined. Fiction is created by this process, but fiction also becomes a way of writing back to the idea that an objective reality is attainable through empiricism by unveiling the process and assumptions of this epistemology. Notably, the way Gaiman enacts the challenge follows a particular convention observable in earlier gothic writing, where it is metaphorized as the contact or conflict at the border between different lands, realms, or spaces. Using the fantastic in this way places Gaiman much closer to the quasi-transcendentalism of Hawthorne than to the resolutely science-orientated Poe, despite his professed admiration for the latter.

The Old World and the New World

One of the defining features of the Dark Age is its engagement with a cultural context that goes beyond the boundaries of America. Its literary origins in the gothic and the Dark Romance, the political and social discourses that inform its narratives, and changing methods of production and distribution for comics all contribute to an immanent and an explicit transatlantic content. In *Sandman*, Gaiman's response to this context makes use of the temporal and spatial qualities of the two-world ontology that have a specific local effect in creating sites of haunting. As one example, Gaiman's re-telling of the story of

Joshua Norton places real and imagined events of Norton's life within the narrative of the Endless, writing the impact of the imaginary on local and individual histories. At the same time, the position of the story within the *Fables & Reflections* collection gives the story of the Emperor of America the context of a series of tales of failed empires. In particular, the juxtaposition in the collection of 'Three Septembers' with 'Thermidor', a story of the French Revolution, makes an implicit comparison between the two post-revolutionary countries. [29]

The comparison between France and America has two key functions. Firstly, it reminds the reader that the new world of America was created in the old world of Europe: Gaiman's claim that *Sandman* is set in 'totally imaginary' America evokes the utopian revolutionary dream that came from Europe, and France in particular. Secondly, it offers the realm of imaginary as the place that unites the two localities: 'Three Septembers' and 'Thermidor' are explicitly connected by the role of the Endless in their stories, just as they are implicitly connected by the political imaginings of their lead characters. In *Sandman*, a transatlantic context is made visible when the two-world ontology proposes the imaginary as a shared global and historical space that transcends geographical borders.

Gaiman's development of a transatlantic realm of the imaginary that unites Old and New worlds is a feature of note throughout his writing that can be traced to his reading of gothic fiction. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* begins with a gothic relationship between the past and present and concludes with a journey back to Europe. The description of Pearl, the 'elf-child', in this text requires the context of a transatlantic and temporal imaginary: 'How strangely beautiful she looks with those wild flowers in her hair! It is as if one of the fairies, whom we left in dear old England, had decked her out to meet us' (Hawthorne

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[29] In another example of shared interests between the writers of the Dark Age, *Sandman* is not the only work to depict the French Revolution. Gaiman was followed by Morrison's 'Arcadia' stories in *The Invisibles* (1995). Although he does not mention this moment specifically, Morrison has acknowledged that *Sandman* had an influence on *The Invisibles* (Morrison and others 2014: 341).

1983: 296). This description is markedly similar to, and appears to foreshadow, Gaiman's novel *American Gods* – a text whose central conceit is the transatlantic journey of figures of European folklore to America. Whilst any number of passages in *American Gods* would confirm a comparison, the clearest is the tale of Essie Tregowan – a young Cornish woman who eventually settles in Virginia in 1761. Made a criminal in England after an illicit relationship, Essie travels to America and takes her belief in Cornish 'piskies' with her. With the belief comes the reality, and Essie is responsible for giving these magical beings a new home in the New World (Gaiman 2005a: 103-113). In both texts, fairies and piskies are not 'left in dear old England' when they are retained in the thoughts of the New World settlers. The language of Hawthorne's characters undermines their belief that the realm of the imaginary has a geographical location on one side of the Atlantic, and Gaiman's text simply gives this linguistic imaginary an ontological reality: in the realm of the imagination, the Old and New World is united and cannot be 'left behind' by geographical movement.

In *Sandman,* the fantastic is joined to a political, as well as folkloric, imaginary. The content of Gaiman's text connects the reappearance of nineteenth-century conservatism in his contemporary discourse with the return to Europe in the form of a story about the French Revolution and a failed attempt at the end of history. Set in 1794, Gaiman positions 'Thermidor' as a critique of political programs that attempt a New World, evoking the concerns that haunt the moment of production. In the story, Robespierre has imprisoned his enemies in the Palais du Luxembourg, including the (imaginary) adventurer Johanna Constantine. When Thomas Paine asks Constantine whether they have met before – 'in America, perhaps?' – Gaiman's fictional world collides with the historical reality of the transatlantic revolutionary period (Gaiman 1993: v.6, #29). Later, Johanna Constantine is subjected to an interview with Robespierre that reveals her aristocratic English background and the time she has spent in both America and Egypt. For the Dark Age reader, these biographical details are crucial. Constantine appears as a hero in the Ozymandias-Batman

mould: she is of aristocratic descent, trained in espionage, and has a transatlantic worldview informed by both Egyptian and American travel. However, the utopian plans of Ozymandias or Miller's Batman are missing from Johanna's character. Instead, it is her captor who desires to change the world, and who has imprisoned her as an anti-revolutionary. Robespierre, not Johanna, is the character fulfilling the trope of the hubristic agent of a New World.

In a moment of stereotypical supervillainy, Robespierre's interview becomes an occasion for him to grandstand to the imprisoned Johanna about his eschatological program:

> We are remaking the world, woman; we are creating an age of pure reason. We have taken the names of the dead gods and kings from the days of the week and the months of the year. We have lost the saints and burnt the churches. I myself have inaugurated a new religion, based on reason, celebrating an egalitarian supreme being, distant and uninvolved. (Gaiman 1993: v.6, #29).

Robespierre shares with Ozymandias a desire to remake the world, the need to dispense with heroes who might try and stop him, and the Enlightenment hubris of a new 'age of reason'. The only significant difference in Robespierre's plan is the removal of history. Where Ozymandias sought to preserve and utilise the wisdom of 'dead gods and kings', Robespierre's plan is for the total eradication of a historical past. His goal is the basis of the narrative, which follows Robespierre's attempt to destroy the still-living head of Orpheus – son of Dream, emblem of Greek mythology, and symbol of the pre-revolutionary age. In this case, the head of Orpheus stands in for the past as preserved in the cultural imagination, and Robespierre's attempted destruction of the head is the destruction of both history and the imaginary in favour of the progress of the rationalist program. Robespierre,

on finding the head of Orpheus, explains: 'the myths are dead. The Gods are dead. The ghosts and ghouls and phantoms are dead. There is only the state and the people'.

Unfortunately, Robespierre's plan to eradicate history is flawed from its inception: not only does the realm of the imaginary transcend geographical space, it also transcends time. The ghosts of history always-already exist, regardless of any governmental structure, because the imaginary exists perpetually (as represented by the Endless). Unless a political change was to fundamentally change the nature of the world of the imagination, stories cannot be simply erased. The titling of 'Thermidor' – a month of the French Revolutionary calendar – has a particular relevance for this point. Renaming the calendar appears to offer the possibility for the political to intrude upon the conceptual schema that we use to determine our world. In context, the program of re-titling the calendar months is an attempt to intervene in an essentially arbitrary (or, imagined) conceptual framework for time. Robespierre's action of removing the names of the kings from the calendar is, in his head, an enforcement of rational thinking. On the other hand, if time is considered in terms of the Endless, perhaps all that is revealed is the arbitrariness of the calendar in the face of the realm of the imaginary. Rational plans cannot become truth by eradicating other ideas, and the attempt reinforces their status as belonging to the realm of the imaginary. The ghost, representing the persistence of previous myths and therefore highlighting the imposition of new myths, remains present.

For Robespierre, the new world depends upon the eradication of the mythology and the irrational that haunts the old world. He looks to the future rather than the past, and whatever history is of interest is materialist rather than magical. Gaiman is again affirming the connection between the fantastic and the political at this point: preserving folk mythology in opposition to Robespierre's plan is an act of resistance to the Terror, preventing the full inauguration of the rational Enlightenment utopia. Ultimately, Robespierre's flaw is not solely his attempt at eradication, but that he cannot recognise the connection between imagination and utopia. Gaiman foregrounds the irony of this inability

when Robespierre is guided by a dream-vision, but uses this to actively pursue his goal of destroying Orpheus, the son of Dream. Johanna, by contrast, who is familiar with both Old World and New, is aware there is 'much more' than the rational to the world in totality. Her belief is proved correct at the tale's climax, as Orpheus' song brings about the downfall of Robespierre and the Terror. The ending, at first sight, appears to prove Robespierre right after all – destroying Orpheus and erasing the myths could have ensured his New World. The criticism is hidden in the second major irony of the tale: it is only through the attempt to imprison Johanna and destroy Orpheus that the vengeance of Dream is visited upon him.

For readers of Dark Age conventions, the narrative pattern of 'Thermidor' should be familiar by this point. Something is buried beneath the mansion; this thing haunts the space as a reminder of the house's history that cannot be effaced; the haunting creates porosity in the space that allows the ghost or the imaginary to return; the intrusion destroys the mansion itself in a moment of revelation. Setting the majority of 'Thermidor' in the Palais du Luxembourg, converted to a prison, Gaiman is working within an established gothic and Dark Age relationship between Enlightenment 'progress', institutionalisation, and the convention of the mansion. Although the decaying aristocratic mansion that recurs throughout the Dark Age has not yet begun to fall apart in this tale, the process has begun: the head of Orpheus is found in a basement, among a pile of decaying corpses. It is only in the course of the attempt to efface its existence that the head is brought up from this place and causes Robespierre's downfall. When what is hidden is brought to light, illumination becomes the discovery of the secrets hegemony attempts to bury.

'The Fall of the House of Usher' then affirms itself again as an essential precursor text, becoming like the crypt which underlies all the mansions of the Dark Age. Gaiman's essay on Poe endorses 'Usher' as the crux of his gothic thought: for Gaiman, Poe's tales 'are powered by what remains untold as much as by what [he] tells us, each of them split and shivered by a crack as deep and dangerous as the fissure that runs from top to bottom of the gloomy house inhabited by Roderick and Madeleine Usher' (Gaiman, 'Strangeness').

In this quotation, Gaiman's interpretation places Poe into a typology of gothic writing into which he himself might also fit. Sedgwick has defined the unspeakable and the hidden as a primary theme of the Gothic (1986: 14). The theme of the unspeakable is embodied in the crypt that is at the heart of, and drives, Poe's tale. In much the same way, the dream as a manifestation of the unspeakable drives Gaiman's stories.

Sedgwick's analysis of the similarity between the unspeakable and the crypt highlights that the symbol of the mansion contains the latent political and linguistic dimensions of Gaiman's ontological scheme. The 'what remains untold' in the conventions of the gothic is easily parsed as that which is effaced by attempts at hegemonic dominance. In a key example, Jodey Castricano works in a longstanding tradition of gender studies in the gothic and focuses on Madaleine Usher, buried in the crypt (2001: 72, 85). The story becomes that of a woman written out of her society, who returns to collapse the mansion in which she was imprisoned. Similarly, if we are to follow Barker's reasoning that Poe and Gaiman represent the 'kind of fantastique' that overcomes the simplicity of a fantastic intrusion into an ordinary world and instead presents the entire world as haunted, then one of the major successes of Poe as a writer is the unveiling of 'what remains untold' as a continually constituent part of our world. Taking Castricano's and Barker's readings of Poe into account, the work of Poe is not to wall off the realm of the imagination as a threat attempting to intrude. Rather, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' reveals the threatened result of the walling-off that has already taken place. Just as Madeleine Usher eventually rises from the crypt, that which is made unspeakable is still present and cannot be forever repressed.

The comparison between Gaiman and Poe seems to point to a radical unveiling of hegemony in their gothic writing, following ways in which Poe has been read in the past. For Gaiman, the comparison is valuable since it begins to draw out the reasons that underlie a turn towards gothic considerations of identity and cultural hegemony in the Dark Age. However, it is worth bearing in mind the conservative tendencies in the 'dark' versions of

gothic. Gaiman's scepticism toward rational Enlightenment politics bears comparison to other pessimistic responses to failed utopian experiments. Despite positioning Dream and Johanna Constantine in opposition to the Terror rather than utopia itself, a stance few would disagree with, it is possible to detect the conservatism of Gray and of Hawthorne in 'Thermidor'. In *The Blithedale Romance*, Coverdale speculates on the failures to improve humanity through political and social experiment: 'as regards human progress (in spite of my irrepressible yearnings over the Blithedale reminiscences), let them believe in it who can, and aid in it who choose. If I could earnestly do either, it might be all the better for my comfort' (Hawthorne 1983: 847). The utopian dream of the new world appears to be dead to Coverdale, and his experiences in Blithedale are responsible. Similarly, Gray's desire to preserve a traditional pragmatic conservatism against both neoliberal and communist rationalism in the early 1990s gives context to Gaiman's apparent desire to preserve local and historic institutions of irrationality for their own sake. The realm of the imagination both transcends national politics and produces locally specific instances of mythology. Humanity's necessary relationship to this realm undermines the revolutionary ideal of an end-of-history or a clean break that erases the past.

In his attempt to erase the imaginary, Robespierre confirms that his rational utopia is susceptible to it. In Derrida's words, 'hegemony still organises the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting' (2006: 46). Ghosts cannot simply be wished or written out of existence by removing their cultural and physical traces in the realm of the actual – the persistence of the imaginary above and beyond the actual means it can never be separated or removed. As the metaphor of the two-sided coin suggests, the imaginary is a necessary part of the whole of reality, and a rationality that aims to erase it is flawed by this very act. This much is re-iterated during Death and Destruction's ontological discussion in *Brief Lives*. The pair return to the moment of Enlightenment eschatological politics and deliberate over the philosophical development of humanity. Their conclusion is that the Enlightenment was, in the end, of little value. As Destruction explains to Dream: 'So they

began to reorganize their lives on principles of reason. Well, what of that? It does not affect my domain; and it will do little to yours that will not change once more' (1994: v.7, #44).

Looking to the Old World is a critical act that has geographical and historical resonance. Returning to the origins of America in revolutionary France, Gaiman becomes part of a long tradition of transatlantic and gothic criticism from Paine to Poe to Derrida. In particular, *Sandman* contains a Derridean challenge to history and rational statecraft, where structuralism becomes a method to rethink Enlightenment claims to power. The critique draws out the impossibility for hegemony to complete its task of eradication, and focuses on the fear that attends the collapse of an ostensibly stable world after the revenant or ghostly return of the presence hegemony attempted to erase. Gaiman's, Barker's and Castricano's readings of Poe are all based in the continual presence of the unsaid, not as removed, but as always latent and discoverable – a visible fissure in the structures of the world. Johanna Constantine in her cell, the head of Orpheus in the basement of the Palais du Luxembourg, and Madeleine in the House of Usher perform the same work, enacting Derrida's theorisation of the haunting latent in hegemony in the metaphor of the crypt and mansion. The connection between Derrida and Gaiman is uncovered through their shared connection to Poe. Castricano's illuminating reading of Poe as a 'kind-of "refrain-effect"' in Derrida – a linguistic returning-to – is equally true for Gaiman. Castricano continues: 'what haunts Derrida's work is the figure of the (fissured) house, at the heart of which is a crypt, the inhabitant of which is the harbinger of the uncanny' (2001: 75).

A Politics of Gender

In the argument I have offered so far, the crypt is a place of imprisonment for the imaginary or the unspeakable that the 'actual' would like to repress. This is a dangerous imprisonment, since the subject-being-enclosed maintains a haunting presence and threatens to break out and destroy the structures that enclose it. As Castricano's reading of

Derrida and Poe suggests, a particular effect of this imprisonment is to turn attention toward the nature of the subject being imprisoned – to read the subaltern qualities of the imprisoned as a threat to an ideological dominant that imprisons. In the case of 'Thermidor', the imprisonment of Orpheus is a deliberate attempt to eradicate the representative of the imaginary: Robespierre's rational utopia must suppress the irrational in order to maintain its power. Paradoxically, as I noted with regard to *Arkham Asylum* above, the suppression of the irrational produces new artistic forms of unreason (Foucault 2001: 199).

Gaiman's imprisonment of the anti-revolutionary Johanna Constantine develops this subtext, uniting the imprisonment of the imaginary with the suppression of the feminine in a way typical of gothic narratives. Johanna is Gaiman's version of John Constantine, the twentieth-century paranormal investigator who would have been familiar to readers of *Swamp Thing* and *Hellblazer*. The gender-switch is alluded to, and the dormant political power it contains is revealed, when Robespierre notes in the interview in the cell that Johanna is versed in 'the art of successfully cross-dressing'. Johanna's role as a spy, or a threat to order, is facilitated both by her knowledge of the fantastic and her transgression of gender roles. In this context, Gaiman's imprisonments offer a critique of hegemony founded in a collocation of the imaginary and gender identity. As in the affinity between the female and the unspeakable brought out by Castricano's reading of 'Usher', the gothic has a long history of building its narratives around the fear of a marginalised other, and conjoining this position with the fantastic. Gaiman's use of this feature demonstrates how it can be used to disrupt hegemony: (dis-)embodying marginalised positions in the gothic conventions of imprisonment, the unspeakable, or the ghostly, both preserves the existence of these positions in the realm of the imaginary and reveals the ways they haunt grand projects and repressive states.

Turning his attention to the relationship between fiction and identity creates Gaiman's most radical political engagements. Although Gaiman certainly owes a debt to

Poe and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' for his engagement with gender identity, his writing should also be compared Hawthorne, who makes the most direct of the Dark Romantic authors' challenges to a patriarchal society. Hawthorne's influence on Gaiman was perhaps less direct than Poe's, but can be traced to the re-readings of the American Renaissance canon by both feminist postmodernist fiction and academia in the 1980s and 1990s. There is evidence, for example, of the friendship between Gaiman and the novelist Kathy Acker. Gaiman 'loved' Acker's most well-known work, *Blood and Guts in High School* – a novel about gender, hegemony and literature where the protagonist takes inspiration from Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (Crispin and Gaiman 2006). Although there is a degree of speculation involved here, it is reasonable to suggest that Gaiman's friendship with Acker, and his reading of *Blood and Guts in High School*, informed his work and is at least partially responsible for his interest in identity politics and revisiting canonical literary fiction.

Even without direct reference to Hawthorne of the sort that Gaiman makes to Melville and Poe, the comparable writing of identity between *Sandman* and *The Scarlet Letter* points to goals shared between the two writers. As Hester Prynne demonstrates, writing is both the mode of and force against elision. To write, or more specifically, to re-write identity is to challenge the boundaries between the actual and the imaginary. The reader is forced to identify with those who exist outside, or in between, these boundaries, coming face-to-face with the status of ghost or transgressor that is forcibly marked onto those in this position.

The letter Hester wears as a written marker of her transgression initially has 'the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself' (Hawthorne 1983: 164). The letter functions to produce for Hester the status of the ghost or the encrypted, the transgressor who cannot fit into the structural relationships of society as they stand. From the enforced position of outsider, written upon

her chest, Hester comes to understand the nature of oppression and what might be necessary to combat its existence:

> As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change, in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. (Hawthorne 1983: 260-61)

The immutable human quality that Enlightenment progress presupposes is absent from Hester's revolutionary program. Unlike the species-being of Marx, the 'ethereal' constant of nature is formed by habit and can be changed or dissipated, yet this still does not offer a path for reform. Hester's options, as she sees them during this moment of reflection, are to choose not to live at all (implicitly, to kill herself and her daughter), or to act to redeem her own sin. *The Scarlet Letter* leans toward the same pessimism toward revolution as in Hawthorne's other works, but Hester is not without hope, and finishes the narrative looking forward to a better time and spreading this news to others.

In the character of Hester Prynne, the relationship between being made unspeakable and speaking-out, or between having an identity written upon you and then re-writing that identity, is revealed. Hester is 'spelled' out of ordinary relations, but by her actions can begin to re-write the meaning of the letter she wears. Being removed from normal relations allows space for radical thought: for Hester, 'in her lonesome cottage, by the seashore, thoughts visited her such as dared to enter no other dwelling in New England'. From this cottage, she will promulgate hope for womankind (Hawthorne 1983: 259, 344). Similarly,

in the gothic, 'language [is] a sort of safety-valve between the inside and the outside which being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive' (Sedgwick 1986: 17). Language and writing is used by a dominant power to close off, to make unspoken, yet from this closed-off position it finds a radical power to transgress the boundaries imposed upon it.

Gaiman is clear about the relationship between language and gender in his work: 'Books have sexes; or to be more precise, books have genders', he has stated ('All Books…'). In the same essay, he describes *The Sandman* collection *A Game of You* as a 'female story', and the narrative entwines a politics of identity with acts of crossing the border into the realm of the imaginary so frequently that his point is hard to miss. The main character, Barbie, returns from the earlier collection *The Doll's House*, where she was part of an experimental community of people outcast by their connection to the imaginary, cohabiting in a dilapidated mansion. By the events of *Game*, she has separated from Ken, no longer dreams of a fantasy world every night, and decorates her face with stage paint before she leaves her apartment. She chooses the chessboard, symbol of light and dark and the game of the narrative's title, for the day the reader meets her. Harking visually to Rorschach's mask in *Watchmen*, her black and white greasepaint, name, and character code the theme of identity and individual opposition to hegemony into the narrative. She is two things in one, made from both real and imaginary characteristics, and writes her own identity onto her face, choosing to change it as she pleases. The same subject of identity against hegemony is reinforced by every main character in *Game*: Wanda is a transgender woman, Hazel and Foxglove are a lesbian couple, Thessaly is a witch. In every case, gender and sexual identity have written the characters out of the world of the actual. Instead, they form their own community of mutual support and neighbourly culture in their tenement – a new Blithedale and a second Doll's House, of sorts.

As the story progresses, the tenement is unexpectedly split by the world of the imaginary. Thessaly performs a spell that utilises the power of the moon to allow the group

to cross into the other realm. Wanda, despite living as a woman in a community of outcast women, cannot make use of the lunar energy necessary to make the crossing because she is still, and always will be, biologically male. In this instant, as the group is separated, the crux of the plot becomes the nature of the relationship between the imaginary and the feminine – a relationship that was not previously in question. Wanda's female identity, until this point also not in question, is stripped from her as she and the reader are informed that her material body is the determining factor in her admittance to the one place this would not be expected – the realm of the imaginary. Samuel Delany offers a way of reading Gaiman's text that draws together the ontology and the politics of this narrative manoeuvre: 'the key to this particular fantasy world is precisely that it *is* a fantasy world where the natural forces, stated and unstated, whether of myth or of chance, *enforce* the dominant ideology' (Delany 1993). Gaiman's decision to deny Wanda access to the magical power exclusive to women confirms the importance of border crossing and the affinity between the female and the imaginary, but it shocks the reader when the ideologies that police gender, existent but often hidden in the realm of the actual, are made explicit and part of the natural order in the realm of the imaginary.

Delany's reading of *A Game of You* complicates the understanding of Gaiman's writing I have proposed up to this point. The argument I have made so far is that under the logic of the spectre, the imaginary can work to destabilise the realm of the actual, threatening hegemony by revealing political thought and common sense as constructs of the imaginary. The need to present a state of affairs as natural or common sense explains the requirement that the Enlightenment state-building project erase the past and its fictions whilst attempting to concretise itself: doing so masks its origins as utopian imagining. Wanda's being shut-out from the power of the moon apparently weakens this argument: the imaginary cannot be a space for utopian thought, and not only is it no different to the actual, it is markedly worse. As Delany puts it, it is 'a fantasy world in which […] the

dominant ideology is not socially constructed but is rather enforced by the transcendental order of nature' (1993).

It is initially tempting to read this issue at the heart of *Game* as a commentary on the relationship between the actual and the imaginary, and the passing of hegemony into the latter realm: 'something travelled from one state of existence to another'. The pessimism toward the possibility for progress evident throughout the Dark Age then becomes a revelation of the stricture preventing this progress. A hegemony or dominant ideology that successfully presents itself as a natural or immutable order, and uses empirical science and materialism to do so, restricts the possibilities for the realm of imagination. In other words, as we grow more accustomed to and familiar with the real world, the boundaries of what we can imagine shrink. Delany, however, suggests that this response is unsatisfying, and pushes the reader to seek a deeper understanding. *Game*, he writes, 'remains just a nasty fantasy unless, in our reading of it we can find some irony, something that subverts it, something that resists that fantasy, an array of details that turns the simple acceptance of that ideology into a problem – problematizes it, in Lit. Crit.-ese' (1993).

For many, the rules of fairy-land – a place where there is nothing to the identity of male or female beyond chromosomes – will seem particularly threatening. What, then, resists the ideology that nature enforces in *Game*? Perhaps unwittingly, Delany's reading for 'something that resists' places Wanda, not Barbie, in the Batman-Rorschach hero role of the narrative. Forcibly made an outcast by a hegemonic system that presents itself as a natural order, Wanda's status as transgressive, or between two states, makes her the gothic figure at the heart of the text. Supporting this argument, she conforms exactly to Sedgwick's 'spatial model' of the Gothic. Her inability to access the imaginary appears as a prime example of the state where 'the self and whatever it is that is outside have a proper, natural, necessary connection to each other, but one that the self is suddenly incapable of making' (1986: 13). Like Batman, or Madeline Usher, Wanda's existence is an act of haunting for the divisions the text creates, revealing and problematizing their barriers. For

this transgression, she is confined to the space that functions like Castricano's crypt of the mansion and Sedgwick's place of live burial (1986: 20). In this case, an apartment in the tenement block – also occupied by a partially animated corpse and the comatose Barbie – becomes the holding place for those with bodies between states.

As if to confirm Wanda's status as gothic transgressor, she fulfils her convention and shares the typical Dark Age fate. In the story's climax, she is killed as the crypt is broken open and the mansion collapses upon itself (Gaiman and others 1993: v.5, #36). Like Batman, and like Rorschach, the revelation of the underlying structure of hegemony dooms the transgressor unwilling to compromise with it: 'the worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralysing instances of the uncanny […] are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall (Sedgwick 1986: 13). In keeping with the convention, just like Batman's false-death or Rorschach's journal, *Game* ends with a promise of a continued haunting of hegemony that cannot be unwritten. After Wanda's funeral, Barbie crosses out 'Alvin', Wanda's birth-name engraved on the headstone, with her preferred 'Wanda' (Gaiman and others 1993: v.5, #36). In the act of re-writing, Gaiman reveals the tendency toward erasure that is promoted by the actual, and promotes instead the continuing work of maintaining and bringing out the unspoken. Gaiman's character and narrative haunts and troubles a materialist binary understanding of gender in just the same way as the Dark Age hero had previously haunted and troubled a state-political ideology.

Game now looks like a narrative that challenges hegemony and leaves a space for an unseen revolutionary work, although one that chimes with Hawthorne's pessimism about the ethereal nature of femininity and the restrictions this may place on change.[30] Gaiman's pessimism should not go unchallenged, of course, and he has engaged with the divided response from critics and readers to the negativity in his depiction of a transgender

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[30] Bender suggests there is a deliberate reference to Kathy Acker hidden in *Game* (1999: 119), which lends support to my reading of the story as a narrative that derives some of its challenge to patriarchal hegemony from Gaiman's friendship with Acker.

character. Indeed, even within the Dark Age framework that serves to explain, if not justify, Wanda's death at the hands of a hegemonic order there is a question to be posed about the implication of the narrative. Gaiman's willingness to write about identity is at odds with his tendency to divest himself of responsibility for his writing by invoking a common writers' defence that he was dictated to by the story. His comment that 'I killed Wanda because she was the only person whose death made the story a tragedy' (Bender 1999: 126) does not adequately address Rachel Pollack's criticism that the death of a focal minority character in preference to those suffering less discrimination suggests an unwillingness to accept that character's life (Bender 1999: 125).

Gaiman's focus on gender and the imaginary also has the consequence of evacuating the realities of a structural interplay of oppressions. In another example, Mad Hettie, one of Gaiman's recurrent representations of urban homeless characters, is a witch and maintains her life through magical means that give her both power and longevity (Gaiman 2014: 66-71). The impetus for the character comes from the use of the accusation of witchcraft as a means to subordinate women, an issue that Gaiman later has the Kindly Ones confront: 'it's one of the things they call women, to put us in our place… Termagant. Shrew. Virago. Vixen. Witch. Bitch.' (1996: v.9, #63). Making magic real for the otherwise totally subaltern Mad Hettie claims back some power her real-world counterparts lack. However, the potential restructuring of government to combat subordination, as Miller aims at in *Dark Knight*, is abandoned. Gaiman, it appears, has set his stall toward a specific, culturally-determined problem rather than Jameson's Marxism where the economics of class subsumes all other approaches. The question, then, is whether an overtly critical position toward the Enlightenment program and a cynicism toward the potential of revolution denies the work of *any* challenge to hegemony. How far can what Jameson terms as the 'liberal' position succeed?

As was the case with Moore, historical context goes a long way to explaining Gaiman's disillusionment with revolutionary grand narratives. The return to the French Revolution and the prioritising of identity over economics suggests that the collapse of the experiment in restructuring society and the immanent 'end of history' are influences on Gaiman's outlook. John Gray's attempt at a post-Soviet, anti-Enlightenment economics offers a parallel and near-contemporary method that formalises the response to the historical context:

> Market institutions are like natural languages in that it is their very nature to be plural and diverse. To model economic policy on the tacit supposition that there is a single, ideal-typical exemplar for all varieties of market institution, to which all real-world cases do or should approximate, is like modelling language teaching on the premise that all natural languages have a tendency to converge on Esperanto.
>
> In the real world of human history as distinct from the illusory history postulated in Enlightenment philosophies, no such convergence is to be expected […] The goal of the social market perspective is […] not of prescribing for any people or polity, but of rendering the changes that are afoot in the world more readily intelligible, by breaking the hold on the understanding of a crude and monistic conception of market institutions in which they are misconceived as self-contained and free-standing systems. (Gray 1995: 62-3)

For Gray, the failure of the Enlightenment ultimately arises from the imposition of the rationalised ideal form onto a real-world situation that cannot conform to an explicitly non-local model. In the terms of the Dark Age metaphors, the utopian palace is never 'free-standing' but relies exactly on the cultural context it seeks to empty-out. In this case, Gray is critiquing the Western neo-liberal model and the 'shock therapy' introduced to newly post-Communist states, but he equally condemns the support for the rational utopia of the Communist project itself: both fail as impositions of the ideal onto the real. The alternative

is to break the hegemonic dominance of this model by insisting upon diverse national cultures as the shaping and undergirding forces behind seemingly equivalent market systems. Although he may disagree over this use of his method, Gray's critique then points to the way Gaiman's explicit political engagements in *Sandman* turn away from the state and towards the individual. By focusing on the local points where political ideals are embodied, the inherent disjunctions between an Enlightenment ideal and a socially-constructed reality are exposed.

Reading the prominence of local identity as the pre-eminent feature of Gaiman's politics is validated by the application of gothic theory. In Sedgwick's terms, the 'Gothic notion of personal identity' is a social construct, rather than an innate and universal content (1986: 155). I can therefore suggest that Gaiman works through anti-Enlightenment pessimism as a revision of a gothic politics of identity. This has a seemingly paradoxical benefit in a system as economically determined by the demands of mass production and distribution as American comics. Ultimately, Gaiman's shift away from large-scale politics and toward questions of individual identity served to broaden his readership. In much the same way as Gray questioned the biases that saw the Anglo-American economic model as universal, rather than a reflection of local historical factors, Gaiman's move away from the statecraft included those marginalised by narratives that previously had barely questioned their inherent biases. Pluralism, in the 1990s, appeared to confer previously un-noticed benefits. In the case of comics, Gaiman contributed significantly to legitimizing the comic narrative for new readers outside the traditional market demographics, leading Karen Berger to write that '*The Sandman* also has a disproportionate number of women who read the series, probably the most of any mainstream comic. In a medium that is still widely occupied by males, that in itself is a major achievement' (1991).

Rewriting Melville

The concerns of the identity politics of the 1990s are engaged with further in the collection *World's End*, where Gaiman's sights are turned to a specifically American Renaissance re-writing of gender. 'Hob's Leviathan', like many of Gaiman's shorter *Sandman* tales, is presented as an experiment in genre that contains clues to its literary-historical context. In this case, the narrative is filled with allusions to Romantic and gothic seafaring stories – the tale explicitly makes reference to *Dracula* and Joseph Conrad, and alludes to Kipling in its gothic colonial mode (Bender 1999: 180). Most prominently, the tale opens focused directly on its protagonist and storyteller who states: 'Call me Jim' (1994: v.8, #53).

Rewriting the famous opening to *Moby Dick* is not simply a case of allusion for Gaiman. The conclusion to the story reveals the choice of phrase as a necessary one for the character. 'Jim' is a teenage girl who has been passing as a boy in order to work on a boat, and Gaiman has exploited the well-known indeterminacy of Melville's phrase. Just as Jim was able to hide his sex behind his name, so the gender-switching narrative has been concealed *behind* the layer of literary allusion. When Barbie wrote 'Wanda' in pink lipstick on the gravestone, lipstick became the method of covering-over 'Alvin', inscribed in stone. In life, Wanda made the same effort to re-write with lipstick the identity her parents and small-town community inscribed upon her. Identity, for Wanda, is locally determined and therefore varies from place to place. With her story occurring in the realm of the imaginary, and with no background beyond it, Jim has the capability to reinvent herself as she sees fit. The name she adopts *becomes* her identity, signifying to all (except Hob) her chosen gender-appearance.

In *World's End*, Gaiman makes a conscious effort to challenge the gender balance of his literary background. The story cycle that makes up *World's End* is summed up and subjected to critique by Charlene, a guest at the pub who has come in from the realm of the

actual. Charlene's criticism rests on a reading of the gender of genre fictions: 'we've heard a swashbuckling adventure, a sea story, a gangster story, a grisly boy's funeral story, and even a little ghost story. They're boys' fictions.' (1994: v.8, #53). Charlene's criticism is reminiscent of Acker's gender-switched re-writings of literary classics and of the culture wars of 1990s academia, and pre-empts Gaiman's later assertion that narratives are gendered. Today, her point is almost a truism. Women are notoriously absent from *Moby Dick*, from the hard-boiled crime that inspired Frank Miller, or from the Lovecraftian horror that has been repeatedly reworked by Alan Moore. As I have noted throughout this thesis, the majority of the obvious literary influences for Gaiman and his contemporaries, as well as the comics themselves and the culture surrounding them, not only omits women but actively abrogates associations of femininity as part of their quest toward cultural legitimacy.

Charlene's recognition of the problem strikes toward the relationship between writing and the world that becomes Gaiman's focus. 'How do they help you make sense of anything? The world isn't like that', Charlene asserts, suggesting that not only do these genres have gender, but this gender-bias is a problem in a world which does not conform to the gendered expectations set up by the stories. Unfortunately, *A Game of You* has already indicated that Gaiman's world *is* like that: the world of the imaginary, where these stories originate and take place, enacts such restrictive notions of gender that perhaps these 'boy's fictions' do work to explain the world. In the imaginary, at least, gender bias and genre bias are one and the same. These biases are replicated in the world itself: Wanda is unable to participate in a narrative of feminine magic because this simply does not allow those with male chromosomes, just like the world of the sea-faring narrative does not allow women.

The relationship between gender and genre is fully exposed when Charlene's criticism draws the attention of Jim, the cabin boy:

> CHARLENE: I'll tell you something else I noticed: there aren't any women in these stories. Did anyone else notice that?
>
> JIM: But, well. What about me, missie? There's me. There was my story. That was a woman's story.
>
> CHARLENE: Oh please. Look girl, the whole point of your story is that there wasn't a woman in it. Just a ship full of sailors, and a giant dick thrusting out of the ocean.
>
> JIM: That wasn't my story.
>
> CHARLENE: Sure it was. I mean, there aren't any real women in any of the stories I've heard tonight. We're just pretty figures in the background to be loved or lost or avoided or obeyed or … whatever.
>
> (1994: v.8, #53).

Regardless of any individual within the tale, *Moby Dick* (reconfirmed as the precursor to Jim's story by Charlene's pun) will never be the 'woman's story' that Jim claims it to be. Charlene's position that 'there aren't any real women in any of the stories' reverses the position of the imaginary in *A Game of You* when she effaces the femininity that Jim sought to assert for herself. In *Game*, Wanda's life as woman was not enough – she was not biologically female and thus did not meet the rules of the Imaginary. In *World's End*, simply being born into a body usually assigned female is not enough to meet the rules of literary criticism – Jim's bodily characteristics are female, but this does not qualify her as a female character. Local context, Charlene suggests, is everything.

Charlene's commentary points to the gothic content underlying this gender-switching narrative. Sedgwick's example of the 'Gothic notion of personal identity' comes from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, where 'the man who reveals that he is a woman is really something else', that something being a spectral, ungendered form (Sedgwick 1986: 155). The same is true of Jim, who is ultimately neither 'biologically' male nor female but a character *within* a tale *within* the realm of the imaginary. Her gender, and sex then, take the 'Gothic view', where 'individual identity […] is social and relational rather than original' (Sedgwick 1986: 142). In a male story, passing as a man, she is masculine. In *Game,* the

same relational approach is given validity when Hazel is shocked to discover Wanda was not assigned female at birth (Gaiman 1993: v.5, #34). Prior to her attempt to enter the imaginary, Wanda's underlying biology has had no bearing on her life within the female community of the apartment block. Her history as a woman undermines the Moon's biologically determinist perspective – in her community her female identity is created socially and relationally. Ultimately, Charlene reveals Jim's constructed male identity in her role as the critic, whose faculties with narrative replicate third-wave feminist engagements with the literary canon.

Just like reality, there is no easy solution offered by Gaiman's work, but comparing the two narratives of 'passing' creates interesting interactions and potential conclusions. For the rules of the imaginary, being female is defined by immutable biology – 'chromosomes as much as […] anything' (1993: v.5, #35). Conversely, in the real world of New York, chromosomes are no barrier to Wanda's lived female identity. In *World's End* Charlene's assessment reaffirms that Jim is a girl, but also reinforces local and socially-constructed identity, even within the imaginary. In both cases, the story itself – the imaginary – is a determining factor of identity, and one that can be both friend and foe to those en-crypted within it. Finding an identity, a voice, and breaking out of the strictures imposed by hegemony may be the best way to wrest gains for those subordinated. Often, this will mean a challenge in the realm of the imaginary to destabilise a materialism and rationalism co-opted by the dominant bloc, but this certainly does not come without dangers – the same dangers that are faced by every hero that turns to the American Renaissance for inspiration for their acts of resistance.

Ultimately, the gothic qualities of *Sandman*, and particularly a gothic structure of identity, become the site of resistance in a text that foregoes a traditional Marxian construction but carries the same strange blend of radicalism and conservatism as its peers into the 1990s. The move toward identity was timely, and no doubt contributed to the success of *Sandman*, effectively broadening the reading audience and legitimizing the form

by responding to the interventions into Marxist thought or the American Renaissance that texts such as *Spectres of Marx* or *Blood and Guts in High School* represent. The most significant change of his response was to rediscover the gothic's long history of representing those marginalised by society in uncanny ways. Castricano has noted the 'violent representation of a certain space that excludes the feminine' (2001: 85) as a shared element in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and the responses to it and other nineteenth-century American Romances. The exclusion of Madaleine Usher from the space of the text, and the lack of focus on her role in studies of the tale are not coincidental, yet the story (as Poe's original makes clear) is contingent upon her absent-presence – she is confined to the crypt and haunts the text. Gaiman replicates a critical context that challenged these absences in American literature by including his own criticism of the effacement of the feminine and the non-binary. Doing so points the reader away from political-economic critical theory at a time when the two-world state dissolved and the imagination of an Enlightenment utopia collapsed. Gaiman, watching the end of Enlightenment politics, makes the connection between language, imagination, and his contemporary context when his narrator stands at the close of *World's End*, 'staring out of one of the windows of the inn at the end of the words. Worlds. I meant worlds.' (1994: v.8, #56).

Conclusion: Ten Years Later

Introduction

The core series of *Sandman* (excluding spin-offs, prequels, and works not by Gaiman) came to a close with issue 75, published March 1996. The year is the third significant date for the Dark Age. With the end of *Sandman* and major changes afoot in both American politics and in superhero comics culture, the period appears to finish just ten years after it had begun. By 1996, both Alan Moore and Frank Miller had left DC vowing never to return. Neil Gaiman and Grant Morrison, on the other hand, had begun to emerge as superstars of genre and cult fiction. Although none of the major creators would permanently stop writing superhero comics, the diversification of their outputs, away from comics, away from the major publishers, and away from gothic aesthetics, indicates that the Dark Age in its strongest form had all but ended by 1996.

After 1996 Miller and Moore were predominantly engaged in producing work for new independent publishers, although both would have comics published by DC despite public breaks with the company. Much of their work was for companies like Image and Dark Horse – publishers that had formed in response to the changes in comics production that took place in the Dark Age. Dark Horse, founded in 1986, and Image, in 1992, made their names as businesses that gave better rights and remuneration to creators whilst also offering more creative control and less censorship of narrative content than DC or Marvel. Attracting prominent creators like Moore, Miller, and Dave Gibbons, these new companies had become major players by the nineties. Titles like *Hellboy, Sin City* and *Spawn* catered for the public appetite for noir and gothic comics and challenged DC's dominance of the adult-oriented serials market. Moore and Miller also used the 1990s to produce a number of

non-comics works: Frank Miller turned his hand to script-writing for *Robocop 2* and *3*, and in 1996 Alan Moore published *Voice of the Fire*, a quasi-modernist novel chronicling the history of an area centred on Northampton. Although he would continue in the comics medium, *Voice* represents a point of departure for Moore, crossing the boundary from comics into the literary world from which he had drawn so much inspiration.

While Miller and Moore would see the reputation of their 1986 works cemented in the 1990s, their reputations as writers were more fragile. Increasingly experimental work published through more obscure channels had varying degrees of critical success, and outspoken interviews and articles developed the impression of both writers as politically extreme, curmudgeonly figures with a strained relationship to Hollywood and the cultural industries. By contrast, Gaiman and Morrison seemed to be on a rising tide of success. As well as finishing *Sandman*, in 1996 Neil Gaiman created the *Neverwhere* BBC TV series and its accompanying novel. He went on to write a number of successful novels, big-budget Hollywood films, and non-fiction articles, building his success in comics into a career of note that straddled the literary-popular divide. In 1996, Grant Morrison began his work on the mainstream *Justice League of America* and the outré Vertigo title *The Invisibles*. He would continue to balance the two sides of his writing presaged by the introduction of experimental artwork and narrative to the superhero genre in *Arkham Asylum*. In the latter half of the 1990s he attained superstar status writing mainstream superhero comics for both major publishers (as well as *JLA*, he wrote major X-Men and Superman stories) whilst continuing off-the-wall independent work inspired by postmodernism, critical theory, gothic literature and psychedelia.

As this brief summary makes clear, 1996 marks the moment where the exemplar Dark Age comics had concluded, and their writers had begun to move in new directions. Thus, it marks a definite point from which to review and re-state the arguments I have made for the distinctive qualities of this ten-year period, from the publication of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 to the end of *Sandman* in 1996. The major

distinctive feature, I will re-iterate, is that the period is best understood through its relationship to American nineteenth-century literature, and a number of political and cultural conditions that shape the works can be discovered through this lens. Having revisited these positions, I will develop my methodology and the idea of a unifying set of concerns in the period by demonstrating that these distinctive qualities can be applied more generally to other comics in the period. Finally, having established a method for understanding the broad grouping termed the Dark Age, it is germane to examine the end of this 'age'. The final part of this chapter will use the method I have outlined to consider the points at which the method finds its limits, and takes new forms, after 1996.

The Primary Arguments of the Thesis

The major claim of the thesis has been as follows: the so-called 'Dark Age' of the American superhero comic is best defined, determined and analysed through the relationship of its major authors, particularly Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison and Neil Gaiman, to the writing of the 'Dark Romantic' American authors, particularly the trio of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe. The choice of authors in both periods is determined by the longstanding critical narratives that group them together, but the innovation of my argument is to recognise and evidence the deliberately created and contextually determined relationships between the two periods. When this relationship is taken as the defining feature of the Dark Age period, and as a method of reading for the works in question, a number of further arguments can be made. These comprise both specific insights into the individual works, such as their political stances, and the discovery of a number of common features and conventions that originate in the American nineteenth-century version of gothic. In all cases, the 'dark' reimagining of the superhero narrative required and exploited a nineteenth-century literary background. By examining how and why the dark reimagining

of superhero comics made use of this background, an undergirding structure for the critical conception of a 'dark turn' is uncovered.

My argument was demonstrated in the first instance by a case study of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*. Miller's references to Poe in *Dark Knight,* which have received little critical attention, open his work to a reading that joins together the overt political commentary and the gothic aesthetics of the text. Miller formalises the relationship of influence between Poe's work and his own in a scene which describes Poe's detective stories as a formative childhood influence on Bruce Wayne. With this single panel, Miller inserts his Batman stories into an existing tradition of American writing and reveals his interest in the history of America and its cultural products. Recognising the effects of this conceit exposes the traces of a number of other works of nineteenth-century American literature in Miller's work. Miller conjoins the superhero tradition with the legacy of American gothic writing, modifying the reader's understanding of both in the process. Building on this argument, my examination of Miller's relationship with his American heritage, metaphorized in the convention of Batman the orphan, explains his ability to simultaneously place his work within and as a break with the superhero tradition.

The history that determines a cultural product simultaneously gives it legitimacy and acts as a restriction on its potential. Miller's focus on these effects of history produces two key analytical terms that recur through all my examinations of texts of the Dark Age. The texts are *gothic*, in that they turn their historical background into a haunting aesthetic, and *dialectic*, in that they attempt to confront and resolve historically-generated contradictions. The expression of these two elements takes a variety of forms across the Dark Age. In Miller, the conventions of the orphan, the mansion and other trappings of an aristocratic lineage, and the flâneur in a threatening urban space all reward investigation as gothic, dialectic objects. Each use of a convention aligns Miller with a gothic and Romantic tradition and evokes a political purpose he shares with writers of the American Renaissance. Miller's outlook is then coloured by the philosophical and critical discourses

that inevitably frame political narratives toward the end of the Cold War and the millennium. The depiction of Batman as orphan contains the project to separate an object from its previous history and rebuild it. In this case, Miller is turning the fear provoked by the orphan into a revolutionary impulse. Batman, as feared crimefighter turned political actor, shares a platform with the orphan Ishmael and several other characters of the American Renaissance who represent a rebellion against state power. The goals of these characters place them close to Antonio Gramsci's vision of a new state that unmakes old hegemony. Miller therefore finds a political alignment in the nineteenth-century conservative, dark, or gothic response to Transcendentalism and socialism, tempered with twentieth-century theorisations of the state and resistance.

The way critics have paired Frank Miller's innovation with Alan Moore's contemporaneous work undermines the complexities of their individual approaches. My chapter on Alan Moore seeks to adjust the standard critical position, seeing Moore neither as a 'solo artist' nor bracketing him totally within an *annus mirabilis* of 1986 (an approach that had been discredited by the early 1990s but persists in much scholarship). In *Watchmen*, Moore criticises the revolutionary hero Miller draws from his national mythology, and develops a different reading. It is not incorrect to pair Moore with Miller, but the pairing should make note of the ways both authors read the same intellectual and cultural context. The similarities, and more importantly, the differences between the two are discovered when the primary point of investigation is Moore's engagement with literary history.

Moore, just like Miller, draws on the nineteenth-century Romance for *Watchmen*. The influence of nineteenth-century anarchism, esotericism and gothic aesthetics can be observed throughout the text. In the first part of my chapter on *Watchmen*, I compared Moore's use of the detective story to Miller's. In Moore, I argue, Poe's Dupin tales are combined with a Romantic emphasis on 'the truth of the human heart' and the psychology of the detective character. Where Miller's Batman is a new Dupin, Rorschach exposes the

fallacies inherent in the conventions that inform this superhero archetype. Rather than follow the same tradition of the detective story that begins in Poe, Moore also draws on weird fantasy and postmodernist conspiracy fiction that aligns itself with Dark Romantic writing. A retrospectively generated line of descent can be traced backwards from Moore to the *Illuminatus!* series by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson to Melville – each author positioning themselves as the inheritor of the previous example. This relationship further explains the political differences between Moore and Miller. Moore follows the example of Shea and Wilson, borrowing from the anti-revolutionary theory of Eric Voegelin, to revel in the conspiracy and esoterica at the heart of revolutionary politics. In *Watchmen*, Moore is clear that the world is more complex than rational or utopian political planning can conceive.

In my chapter on Moore, I suggested reading Moore as a link between the American Dark Age of Frank Miller and the British, supernatural Dark Age. Moore acts as this link both in content and in terms of the economic changes to comics production during the Dark Age. In the first case, *Watchmen* considers the political reality of the superhero character almost simultaneously to Miller in *Dark Knight*. Unlike Miller, Moore prefers gnostic revelation to revolution, undermining attempts at post-Cold War unity at the same time as grand solutions were becoming untenable. Similarly, he moves toward a transatlantic approach that acts as a stand-in for his stated global or universalist goal. In the second instance, Moore gave DC the impetus to hire new British creators who brought a more supernatural, critical, and transatlantic sensibility to superhero comics. The company was rewarded with economic gains and increased cultural legitimacy. Ultimately, rather than the American orphan Frank Miller creates, who seeks to re-inscribe his own parentage and carve out a legitimate position, Moore presents himself as a 'watchman' or observer of the America he creates, offering illumination and understanding from a vantage point at some distance from his object.

The Dark Age then becomes a trend definable by the sequence of shared aesthetics, deliberate responses to nineteenth-century gothic writing, and incorporation of twentieth-century political thought. In the next chapter, I moved beyond the 1986 comics to 1989 – the year that gave rise to *Arkham Asylum* and *Sandman*. Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* is the best representative of the aesthetics of the Dark Age. I focus on the text as a gothic and dialectic response to Miller and Moore. By returning again to the nineteenth century for inspiration, but incorporating a set of theoretical concerns that have their origins in Foucault and Bakhtin, Morrison creates a gothic text that is haunted by the politics of the early Dark Age. His work differs from the first stage of the Dark Age in that he uses this haunting to create a textual space where he can rescue Batman from the reality of international relations or Reaganomics. In essence, Morrison's use of the same background material becomes a method of undermining Moore's and Miller's usages of that material, in order to turn the superhero comic towards his own purpose. Turning the asylum to its original purpose as a place of treatment, Morrison's Batman story isolates the hero in the asylum for the deliberate purpose of regeneration – treating the psychological division that had been thrust upon the character. Morrison, in effect, uses the methods of reversal prominent in Bakhtin's carnival space and in Poe's asylum narratives to effect what Fredric Jameson describes as a dialectical reversal: the Batman character had been made negative by Miller and Moore, and this negative conception is again negated by Morrison in order to create something new.

As well as a change in outlook, the latter part of the Dark Age is characterised by a change in the format, marketing and publishing of superhero comics. Whilst *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* are discrete comics series collected into book form, *Arkham Asylum* and *The Killing Joke* are published first as complete texts, without the initial stage of a comics series. Just as the comics' content evokes a literary history and gained a subsequent boost to its cultural legitimacy, the arrival of the 'graphic novel' as a marketing tool capitalised on the success of the one-volume publication. A second change occurred when DC, and

later its specialist imprint Vertigo, began publishing longer comics series with the view to collecting the resulting narrative arcs in multiple book-length 'volumes'.

The Vertigo period of the Dark Age is dominated by Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, which became its best-selling title. An examination of the marketing of the title reveals it to be a calculated response to capitalise on the successful innovations of Miller and Moore. Similarly, where Morrison looked to work against the trend of Moore's politics, Gaiman is more clearly continuing Moore's line of thought. Gaiman's gothic scepticism toward utopian politics, drawing on Moore, is framed by the collapse of the most prominent attempt at the Enlightenment ideal of a planned state. Thus, Morrison's dialectical method is abandoned in favour of an increasingly Derridean concern with ghosts, haunting, and a structuralist mode of thought. Gaiman seeks in *Sandman* to question the two-world narrative of the Cold War, and instead make an intervention at the level of the individual. In my chapter, I have aligned this act with the wider intellectual context of the time, which attempted to rethink politics in the world after 1989.

In the long run of *Sandman*, there is a visible transition from the interest in statecraft of Moore and Miller to the beginnings of the culture wars and a turn inward for American political thought following the demise of the Soviet Union. The beginnings of the change can be seen as early as *Dark Knight*, with its focus on the internal politics of the United States and the early uses of the metaphor of the monster-in-the-mirror that will become a recurring theme for the Dark Age. In Gaiman, the return to the nineteenth century becomes a way of addressing the same virtual America that has haunted the Dark Age. For Gaiman, this virtual America becomes the 'unreal' America, where reality itself (and particularly the political reality that was Frank Miller's focus) is revealed as an ideological construct. With the assertion of imagination and fantasy as co-existent with the real America, Gaiman borrows from Poe's and Hawthorne's Romances a world where the real and imaginary intermingle.

The philosophical outlook that emphasises a unity between the conceptual and the physical problematises the Enlightenment goal of a political utopia built on the eradication of myth and history. Gaiman offers instead a world in which the narratives that have been effaced by Enlightenment politics – the fantastic, the subaltern, the encrypted – break free of the prisons to which they have been confined. Following this path, later *Sandman* stories turn to a politics of gender and identity to express a radical challenge to hegemony. Here, Gaiman borrows from the third-wave feminism of his contemporaries (and veterans of the American culture wars) and their specific rereading of canonical American nineteenth-century literature. Ultimately, the defining features of the Dark Age maintain their purpose. In Miller and in Gaiman, nineteenth-century American literature represents a structure to be challenged, whilst simultaneously providing the best model for making this challenge. This shared purpose exists despite the radical differences in the political outlooks between the writers that make these challenges.

I have demonstrated that the works often considered as part of a definable moment in the history of the superhero comic are united by a relationship not yet considered, and new readings of the individual political and aesthetic contents of each work can be found by determining the unifying factor behind their similarity. As well as the individual readings presented above, the method of investigating the works of the Dark Age through the prism of their shared literary ancestors reveals a series of features that bind the works together. Often, these features are derived directly from the writing of the nineteenth century, and comprise what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls 'conventions' – the term she uses for shared narrative and aesthetic features that can be used to define a work as gothic (Sedgwick 1986: 9). There are a number of conventions that can be drawn out of the Dark Age that point to an underlying unity of purpose and heritage. These recurring symbols have a particular narrative and metaphorical resonance to the politics of Dark Age texts, as well as establishing a shared lineage of gothic and Romantic writing. In each case, the convention can be traced back to its previous iterations, and several of the key arguments of

the thesis are invoked by investigating these lineages. Some examples of these symbols, and the broad themes that underlie them, are worth briefly recapping at this point.

The theme of the haunted mansion is found first in Miller's texts. Early in the thesis I established a link between Wayne Manor and Hawthorne's description of the House of the Seven Gables as places to secure and protect a fading aristocracy. This protection is then revoked as the mansion is destroyed, with comparable descriptions in *Dark Knight* and Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. The mansion recurs in a variety of forms throughout the Dark Age, such as Dr Manhattan's palace on Mars, Arkham Asylum, the Palais du Luxembourg, and the palace of Dream. In Miller, Hawthorne and Poe, the mansion is tied to a concern with aristocracy, and the Old World. Destroying the mansion becomes a metaphor for the collapse of the old order, and in Miller's case the possibility of a new world. Miller's politics are then confronted by Moore in the figure of Ozymandias, who must reject his aristocratic origins and inherited wealth in order to remake the world. In *Sandman,* Robespierre becomes the agent of hegemonic dominance in his quest to maintain the revolution and install a new world. His co-opting of the Palais du Luxembourg demonstrates the fallibility of the new utopia, as the mansion in the Old World becomes a prison in the new. The mansion is a gothic convention that is read as a symbol of old orders, repressive structures coded as historical monuments and traditions. Its use not only unites the aesthetic and the political codes of the Dark Age in one symbol, but demonstrates the way in which the two are inseparable. The mansion must exist as evidence of a historical lineage of works reaching back to earlier Romantic European writing, but it must be destroyed so that the oppression brought about by the codification of structures based on this lineage can be undone and new innovation created.

The aristocratic legacy is also the basis for the haunting of the mansion. Particularly in Hawthorne and in Morrison, the concern with history is expressed not only as something that must be confronted but as something that permeates institutional power and threatens it, embedded in its foundations. Haunting, in essence, represents an immanent internal

threat. The haunted mansion therefore shares features with the crypt and the asylum – each symbol speaks for a trapped or hidden presence that threatens to undermine a power structure. The primary antecedent to this convention, as gothic scholars have identified, is Madeleine Usher. In several cases, the potential of the encrypted presence to bring down the mansion is exploited by Dark Age writers: Miller leaves Batman underground and ready for revolution, Gaiman demonstrates the ways in which life as a transgender woman threatens an established and normalised gender binary. In *Watchmen*, the collapse of the mansion always occurs at a point of revelation or illumination, suggesting Moore's political orientation towards the power of gnostic insight, and in Morrison the haunted asylum is destroyed from the inside by Batman and the Joker in an act of regeneration. In each case, haunting and the crypt represent a latent challenge to power that forms the basis of the radical politics each writer seeks to develop for their gothic writing.

The haunting of the mansion shares features with the psychological focus on the dangerous internal life of the hero. Both signify a latent danger inherent within the tradition that had been overlooked. In a television interview, Alan Moore described Batman as a 'vigilante psychopath', and indicated that Rorschach was a deliberate effort to unmask this tendency (Threadgould 2007). In the Dark Age, the hero's typical role as arm of the state came into conflict with an American valorisation of the outlaw that has its roots in nineteenth-century literature. The position of the hero becomes one of heroic dissenter and therefore the hero becomes subject to the threat of institutional correction. As such, institutionalisation features prominently as a tool of the state to counter the disruptive tendencies of the hero. I connect the imprisoned outlaws of the Romance, such as Hester Prynne and Bartleby, to the superhero throughout the thesis.

The disordered mind, and the disruptive potential of the hero, is represented throughout the Dark Age by the convention of the mirror. Reflection has a variety of functions within the narratives I have considered. In *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller uses reflection to reveal the internal monster of the Bat. Building on a tradition evident in

Hawthorne, Batman must confront his inner darkness when it is reflected back at him –
either in a mirror or metaphorically through the observation of others. The distorted mirror-
image presented by the reflection also serves to highlight the source of the internal monster.
In gothic texts where the self is constructed through social interactions, the state is not only
culpable for the creation of a monstrous reflection, but deliberately exploits its ability to do
so. Characterising threats or outsiders as distorted mirror-images, the state justifies a
program of institutional correction that nullifies the threat to its hegemony. The focus on
mirrors produces the recurring scene of the mirror-maze as a place where distorted
reflections are created and multiplied. This scene, and the convention, is tied more closely
to institutional correction when Morrison metaphorizes Arkham Asylum as a mirror-maze
for Batman. Exploiting the threat of institutionalisation present in the early Dark Age,
Morrison makes the asylum a distorted mirror that can rescue Batman from the downward
spiral toward death that is the inevitable conclusion of a conflict with the state.

Posing the central figure as heroic dissenter with little chance of success leads to my
conclusion of a shared political attitude among the authors of the Dark Age: the radical *yet*
conservative position. Commentators have often either uncritically lumped together the
politics of the Dark Age superhero or concentrated on differences between the authors in
terms of binary left-right positions. In fact, tracing the role of the superhero back to the
nineteenth-century reveals that the hero makes use of a longstanding tradition of dissent in
order to undermine repressive states *and* prevent new utopian impulses on the basis that
these too will inevitably become repressive states. Similarly, understanding the relationship
between the superhero, the state, and institutionalisation as a practice of criminal and
psychological treatment unites the Dark Age with nineteenth-century developments in the
treatment of mental health. The disordered mind, the threatening urban environment,
conspiratorial outlooks, and a method of treatment via mirror are given fictional presences
in the works from which the Dark Age draws its inspiration. The internal inconsistencies
that drive the gothic superhero narrative, metaphorized as hauntings and psychological

monsters, will continue to exist in any new state unless they can be dialectically resolved. This position is similar across each of the major writers, and creates a broadly united political reading of the Dark Age, tempered by the variety of twentieth-century political thought that also turns to, or develops from, nineteenth-century esoteric, utopian, post-Enlightenment, and alienist writing.

Each of the recurring themes, images and conventions I have delineated ties the works of the Dark Age together aesthetically, but there is also a relationship to the moment of production that should not be forgotten. The imagery of old and new world that recurs through the Dark Age is connected to the increasingly global network of influences for comics creators of the period. These conditions have previously been noted for individual creators, for example in studies of the transpacific elements of Frank Miller's work, or the case of the British Invasion writers. In the Dark Age, the political and historical connotations of a transatlantic cultural and commercial sphere unites writers not sharing a geographic location. Despite Frank Miller standing out as the only American writer in my study, each writer shares in the same sense of a European historical context for gothic conventions. Furthermore, increasing global political concerns find different expressions in each text, but reflect the same moment as America faces the end of the Cold War and the fragmentation of global blocs. On a more medium-specific note, the resistance to psychological treatment and concern with the asylum and the mental state of the superhero has origins in the use of psychology to target comic books as a legitimate form. It is no accident that the books of the Dark Age combine horror and crime stories with deliberate attention to a literary past. The legacy of the comic book code, which the Dark Age challenges, weighs heavily on these works. It is worth remembering, then, that the conventions and narrative elements that unite these works speak to a shared intellectual history and a specific mode of production – a fact that emphasises the changing nature of both comics and global politics at the time.

In summation, the argument of the thesis draws together a number of works under a pre-existing term – the Dark Age – and refines this term with the specific tenet of a relationship to nineteenth-century literature. This refinement then allows a better understanding of the critical grouping, as it provides a lens to examine the shared imagery, politics, history and contemporary situation of the works in question. The Dark Age, seen cohesively, looks like a series of arguments, played out as gothic comics, over the correct interpretation of the Romance conventions and politics that underpin the superhero story. Ultimately, all the works use the relationship between the superhero genre, the gothic mode, and the nineteenth-century Romance to import the potential for radical politics and cultural legitimacy into the comics form. This act of importation explains the numerous similarities between the works, and in particular helps make sense of their similar, individually nuanced, and often misunderstood political outlooks. Their politics is a politics of gothic, and of the dark side of the American Renaissance: a challenge to a rational, material state with the unknown, the encrypted, and the unstable. Just as Melville's or Hawthorne's dark visions of Transcendentalism challenged both the state and the socialist reformer, the Dark Age takes on the state as the American and global stage changes – claiming their own territory as commentator and agitator in the process.

Further Works of the Dark Age

The texts I have concentrated on in this thesis represent some of the most critically significant works of the Dark Age. Having developed a series of arguments from these works, it is worthwhile to consider in brief several other texts of the period. Doing so offers a way of testing by experiment the validity of the conclusions I have drawn, reiterates the major themes of the thesis, and demonstrates the potency of the analytical framework I have developed. When the analysis is performed, a direct correlation between content and aesthetic and narrative conventions can be shown to go beyond the four writers on which I

have concentrated. This has the potential to draw other texts into the critical spotlight. Some have typically been excluded, it appears, for reasons based on previous definitions of the Dark Age or equivalent attempts at periodisation. My approach, whilst it does not ignore other factors, includes works primarily on the grounds of content. More specifically, it includes works on the grounds that they share a literary heritage or a similar expression of political context in their narrative. In 2016, while comics studies balances a number of methods and exists as a fundamentally interdisciplinary exercise, this approach offers novel conclusions and new insights. In this specific instance, there is the potential value that this method could widen the scope of the Dark Age beyond publisher or format to read a wide cultural field.

A particular victim of other approaches to the Dark Age has been *Kraven's Last Hunt*, written by J.M. DeMatteis with art by Mike Zeck. Published in 1987, it fulfils a number of criteria for inclusion in the grouping of a 'Dark Age' yet is not often accorded the same critical concern where the narrative has tended to focus on British writers at DC.[31] Nonetheless, the book is an accomplished work and fits squarely within my content-focused approach. In the story, Spiderman is captured and buried alive by Kraven the Hunter. DeMatteis frames these events within the context of the Cold War and the failures of Enlightenment world-building: Kraven is the descendant of a line of Russian aristocrats who were forced to flee to America after the 1917 revolutions. Assuming Spiderman's costumed identity, Kraven must prove himself heroic by fighting Vermin, a sewer-dwelling monstrosity. Vermin embodies the major concerns about urban and national development that the Dark Age inherits from the mid-nineteenth century: he hates city people, whom he plucks from the streets to eat, and 'America' (Vermin had previously featured in Marvel

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[31] A focus on place of origin, whilst revealing, also glosses over DeMatteis' role in the development of the Dark Age as one of the more important contributors to *House of Mystery* during Karen Berger's time as editor (Round 2014: 182). Although Round emphasises the importance of DeMatteis' 'I... Vampire!' within the vampire genre, like others she doesn't mention his continuing role in the Dark Age.

comics as an opponent of Captain America, and DeMatteis does not shy away from the easy synecdoche). Like Batman, Kraven lives in a decaying mansion where a significant proportion of the narrative occurs. The narrative is embedded with clear gothic conventions – the dangerous city, the declining aristocracy – and aligns itself with a Romantic literary tradition when DeMatteis rewords William Blake's 'The Tyger' as a refrain for the story.

The obvious aesthetic and narrative similarities between *Kraven's Last Hunt* and the major works of the Dark Age were appreciated even before the work was published. The series began as a proposal to DC for a Batman series based around the idea of live burial (a prominent feature shared with Miller's *Dark Knight*), but the pitch was rejected when DC acknowledged the similarity with, and chose to concentrate their efforts on, Moore's proposal for *The Killing Joke* (DeMatteis and Zeck 2013: 4). My method of determining the alignment of late 1980s political concerns and Romantic writing does the work of explaining these similarities, adding some clarity to the reasons behind DC's initial rejection of the story. Importantly, with a long period of development and a publication date not long after *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, *Kraven's Last Hunt* indicates that the Dark Age originated in a set of shared concerns that stem from the moment of production rather than, as some have argued, in a deliberate aping of Miller and Moore.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from Brian Augustyn and Mike Mignola's one-shot *Gotham by Gaslight*. Published in 1989, the narrative imagines a Victorian-era Batman investigating the Jack the Ripper murders. The most explicit connection between Batman and his nineteenth-century origins of all of the Dark Age, *Gotham by Gaslight* incorporates nearly all of the key themes from the major works of the period: the asylum, the orphan, the dangerous urban space, the development of psychiatry, the detective, and a transatlantic journey from London to Gotham. The narrative begins with Bruce Wayne in Europe. He is psychologically obsessed with, and continually returning to, the moment of his orphaning and is studying with Dr Freud. He then travels to London at the time of the Ripper murders, and from Europe back to America. In Gotham, Wayne is falsely imprisoned in Arkham

Asylum for a series of murders in Gotham that resemble the killings by Jack the Ripper. He must solve the case as Batman to exonerate Wayne. The familiarity of this narrative points to the ways in which specific historical contexts aligned to create a movement in comics. Moore's *From Hell* draws specific parallels between the end of the nineteenth-century and the contemporary world, as does the transposition of Batman to 1888 in *Gotham by Gaslight*. In both cases, the choice of topic was no doubt provoked by the media focus on Jack the Ripper during the centenary year of 1988, but the groundwork for comics that return to nineteenth-century urban gothic and crime narratives (and Jack the Ripper should be understood as such even in its contemporary reportage) has been created by the comics that have already begun to deliberately demonstrate the parallel between the two modes.

It is difficult to imagine the commissioning of original works like *Gotham by Gaslight* and *Kraven's Last Hunt* without the early successes of Moore and Miller in shifting the superhero narrative towards a gothic and Romantic mode. However, it is also true that as works in this mode became more successful there were a number of attempts to recapitulate the major features of these works by those seeking to replicate the obvious financial and critical successes of the major Dark Age works. Grant Morrison's Batman series *Gothic* (1990) stands out as a particular example. The full title of the work is *Gothic: A Romance*, a title that has nothing to do with the narrative beyond announcing the aesthetic mode of the story. As this titling suggests, the story reads as a litany of Dark Age tropes. Every chapter begins with a literary epigraph, Batman is haunted by visions of his childhood and orphaning, there is a story of transatlantic passage, a crime drama, and a parade of haunted gothic buildings and repressive institutions (in this case, an English boarding school transposed to the US East Coast). When the villain quotes directly from Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' at the denouement of the story, it should hardly come as a shock to the reader approaching the Dark Age through the lens of literary allusion. Although it is another example of an author of the Dark Age creating deliberate relationships with earlier 'dark' moments, it is hard to argue for the cultural or literary

significance of *Gothic* in comparison to *Arkham Asylum*. *Arkham Asylum* engages with and attempts to go beyond Miller and Moore, yet the production of a text that merely replicates their work a year later suggests a deliberate attempt to capitalise on their success.

There are, of course, a large number of comic texts and related media of the later Dark Age that work to build on the atmosphere, mode or methods created by allusion to nineteenth-century literature. I do not have the space to consider Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *Batman: The Long Halloween*, the development of the gothic hero Spawn, or the Tim Burton *Batman* film of 1989. However, even from this summation it should be evident that the Dark Age was neither planned capitalisation on one or two works, as it has sometimes been considered, nor was it wholly accidental. Rather, it emerges from a set of texts (and has its beginnings much earlier than these texts) that share a background and a set of specific concerns. These concerns create a textual similarity that is then developed further both by the desire to respond textually to the early works, such as in the case of *Arkham Asylum*, and by production and marketing efforts, particularly at DC Comics.

Underlying these texts is a relationship to a different literary period. This relationship is deliberate in some cases, but in many less obvious cases it is imbibed as part of the influence of the major works of the Dark Age. Writing that deliberately replicates or seeks to follow-on from these works often transposes a set of textual concerns whilst removing the allusions themselves. In other words, where Frank Miller makes clear his debt to Poe, there are any number of Dark Age works that aim to replicate Miller's gothic violence without allusion to Poe, just as Vertigo continued to produce works that deliberately reformulated Old World fairytales or adventure tales long after the conclusion of *Sandman*. In every case, returning to the source in the American Romance tradition is a productive exercise that allows the works to be framed both as works in their own right and in relation to other texts of the Dark Age, producing insight into their content. The evidence is also clear that the theory is predictive, in some way. Works can be brought into the fold of the Dark Age by their aesthetic association and the period in which they were produced,

and close reading can then discover the conventions that they contain. This scrutiny reveals clear parallels to (or, in Morrison's case, explicit quotation from) the same source texts, fleshing-out the political and literary context for the texts. The works, just as we might expect, open themselves to this reading and we unlock more about them within this framework. The framework justifies itself as a useful methodological tool that could be applied to the large amount of material still to be considered by studies in the superhero comic.

The End of the Dark Age?

If it is true that both the political climate of the late 1980s and the successes of Miller, Moore and others produced a number of works of synchronous or deliberately similar content, it is also true that by the mid-1990s, there was a diminishing amount of new works in this mode. The works of the Dark Age share a specific set of concerns and seek to address these concerns in their narratives. The praise heaped on certain works of the Dark Age, almost immediately following their publication, had an impact across superhero comics for some time. However, as the changing politics of *Sandman* suggests, by 1996 the moment that had generated these concerns had passed. Since comics fandom and critical studies tend to delineate superhero comics into periods, and a change in these periods is often understood as occurring around 1996, it is necessary to briefly examine this idea. In light of my earlier arguments about periodisation, in this final section I address the 'end' of the Dark Age by emphasising its ongoing effects as comics after 1996 sought to preserve or protect the commercial and cultural value it had accrued, for good and ill.

Matthew Costello begins his discussion of comic books after 1996 with the statement that 'by the mid-1990s a divisive partisanship and ideological "culture war" suggested that the consensus identity of Cold War America had long vanished' (2009: 195). At the end of the Cold War, and without the need for a united front against a looming

external threat, America began to look inwards and reflect on its internal societal divisions. The result was the appearance of a different approach to the comic-book superhero in the mid-1990s. From 1996 onwards, Iron Man and Captain America turn their attention to the enemy within America. Stories feature American communities infiltrated, enemies found within the capitalist order of big business, and confrontations with the power and extent of government-sponsored force. The new superhero comics after 1996 are less gothic, less global or transatlantic, more colourful. Furthermore, they are more inward looking from a narrative-historical perspective: they derive legitimacy from the history of superhero comic rather than from a prose culture. They can thus be read as a response to reaching the narrative and commercial limits of the dark turn after 'the stability of the bipolar world gave way' (Costello 2009: 192).

Costello's approach reads comics in their political context, creating a period from 1986-1996 that responds to the consequences of Reaganomics, the rise of American vigilantism and the end of the Cold War. The second inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1985 certainly impacts the first major works, *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, as both deal with the effects of a long-lasting right-wing presidency. The beginning of the end of the Cold War and end of the Reagan era matches the second major moment of the Dark Age in 1989, and the second inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1996 marks the transition from the end of the aftermath of the Cold War to a new era for American politics. The transition in national mood corresponds, in Costello's argument, to the new look for Marvel comics after 1996 that forms the backbone of his argument (2009: 201ff). Whilst Costello's thesis is broadly accurate, as a periodisation for DC or Vertigo the issue is not as simple. Although *Sandman* ended that year, without *Sandman* (and, to a lesser extent, *Hellblazer*), the success of *Preacher, Transmetropolitan*, *Fables*, and many others would not have been assured. The continued publishing of these titles, alongside *Sandman* spin-offs, suggests a legacy that extends well beyond the end of *Sandman*. 1996 could be seen as the end of the Dark Age 'proper', then, as long as we can accept the continuation of many of the structures it

developed in other forms. Costello's delineation based on changes in the political landscape of America is neat but not exhaustive.

Costello develops his argument by suggesting that the post-1996 superhero comic is 'neoclassical': it looks to the 1960s and 70s for inspiration, when the dominance of Marvel and DC as the major publishers was established and new titles such as *Spiderman* and *Fantastic Four* cemented their hold on the market. Looking back to the era when superhero comics developed their aesthetic identity, comics post-1996 had a 'more contained look [than the 1986-96 period], with gutters separating panels […] and a color scheme that accentuates bright backgrounds and primary colors'. Whilst changes to the colour scheme suggest a move away from the darkness of the 1980s, Costello also notes in the same section of analysis that the comics operated with 'greater focus on visual rather than verbal narrative' (2009: 201-2). The difference is telling. Even though Costello's argument does not consider a relationship to a literary heritage, here his analysis is in line with mine. After 1996, the role of the comics writer as author of literature, a key innovation of the Dark Age, is diminished in favour of comics as visual form. The use, and sometimes overuse, of the verbal that characterised much of the Dark Age – exemplified by *Gothic* staging its entire narrative with literary quotation – appears to drop away in the period of 1995 onwards. A focus not on the literary but the comics heritage of the superhero comic is a return to a very different original form.

Marc DiPaolo offers a different argument towards periodisation for the superhero narrative, that leads to a similar conclusion. DiPaolo frames the development of the superhero story in terms of creative control of the superhero character, positing four basic stages. The first two stages are the development of a new superhero character and the subsequent capitalisation on this character in the form of branded products, television tie-ins, and other methods of market saturation. Following this, 'in stage three of the development of the superhero narrative, the company notices that the public has grown weary of a character, and allows a new writer to come on board the comic book to provide

a radical, deconstructionist take on the character, emphasizing its fallibility.' This moment should sound familiar. As DiPaolo notes, '[t]he 1980s was replete with this kind of storytelling' and his argument makes direct reference to Miller and Moore. The change post-1996 is also explained by DiPaolo in terms of creative limits:

> Stage four sees the comic book companies at a loss to know how to proceed with […] characters who were so completely dismantled during the deconstructionist era. In consequence, they turn to fan writers, who […] have a complete vision of the character as it was originally intended to be, as it was massmarketed to parents and children, and as it was psychoanalyzed, killed, and dissected during the 1980s. The fan writers – in the mold of Mark Waid, Kurt Busiek, and Geoff Johns then produce a new, 'greatest hits' version of the character. (DiPaolo 2011: 31-2)

When Costello and DiPaolo's arguments are combined, they offer a more comprehensive reasoning for the transition that takes place around the end of *Sandman*. Changes to global and American politics in the mid-1990s drew to a close the context that informed the gothic superhero comic, whilst a new generation of artists sought to preserve by assimilation or shore-up the products they loved against the assaults of the Dark Age. As the major writers turned away from comics, a space was opened for new faces to respond to the critiques of Moore and Miller. These writers derived legitimacy not from their status as writers of literature but as fans of the superhero comic.

    Marvels, by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross, exemplifies the new era in this argument. First published in 1994, it retains the hallmarks of the Dark Age but effectively inaugurates the transition that becomes mainstream by 1996. The book's introduction reminds readers of the spectre of cultural legitimacy that the Dark Age had yet to banish when it cites the volume as evidence that 'tales told in an illustrated format can favourably compete with any and every form of literature' (Lee 2009). Even without Stan Lee's introduction, the text deliberately frames itself within the Dark Age context of literary antecedents. The first page

opens with an epigraph from Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the reference is reinforced two pages later when the Human Torch describes his maker as a 'modern day Prometheus, stealing fire from the heavens and handing a human torch down to man'. The opening technique of literary allusion in combination with the books' painted art and a production schedule of a discrete, four-issue series cloak the text in the familiar signs of the Dark Age superhero comic.

However, the obvious parallel between Phineas Horton and Dr Frankenstein does little to produce or enhance a reading of the work as a gothic text in the way of the Dark Age, and only the first book of the series contains such an explicit literary reference. Positioning the fictional inventor of the first superhero as a 'modern Prometheus' is better read not as a way of aligning him with a literary tradition but as praise of the superhero genre itself. In a text that examines, and ultimately celebrates, the existence of superheroes as spectacular 'marvels' for the population of New York, the reference is a laudatory remark aimed at the first superhero creators – a celebration, albeit with some irony, of the enduring power of the superhero genre as the modern equivalent of a divinely-inspired gift. Just as Grant Morrison would borrow the trappings of the Dark Age to challenge it in *Arkham Asylum*, *Marvels* uses the approach typical of the Dark Age to a new effect. Rather than seek validation through the application of literary techniques and the demonstration of a literary heritage for his comic, Busiek opts for an approach that celebrates the genre and its creators on their own terms. It is hard not to read an authorial comment into Busiek's protagonist's words at the end of the first book, as Phil Sheldon comments that following the end of the Second World War, 'the world had shifted again. The dark menacing shadows had been lit up' (Busiek and Ross 2009). The inference is clear – after the end of the Cold War, a new era is dawning for the superhero comic.

Responding to attempts at periodising the superhero comic, Roz Kaveney has commented that 'some critics have tried to popularise the idea that the rise of writers like Busiek and [Brian Michael] Bendis in the late 1990s and the early 21st century has

inaugurated a neo-Silver age' (Kaveney 2007: 18 fn3). The act of looking-back in this case is prompted by the failure of the Dark Age to sustain its innovative potential. She writes: 'it did not take especially long for the new adult comic to become bogged down in laddish clichés of its own, ones rather less innocent than those of most superhero comics. By the turn of the millennium, I had ceased to expect very much from the comics I had hopes for in the 1980s' (2007: 59). Kaveney's major example of this trend is the use of violence in the texts. Violence, and particularly gender-based violence and sexual assault, had been incorporated into the Dark Age for a set of deliberate functions. The realistic violence of *Dark Knight* challenged current attitudes toward the superhero comic. The theme was developed by Moore in *Watchmen* to the degree that the sexual assault perpetrated by the Comedian against Silk Spectre becomes a primary narrative point, part of his attempt at a 'holistic' portrayal of the superhero character. Similarly, although the depiction of a cross-dressing Joker was excised from Morrison's text (Morrison 2012: 226), both Gaiman and Morrison introduced gender-identity, sexuality, and the associated risks of gender-based violence into narratives from which these issues had been notably absent. Gaiman, in particular, is openly indebted to Kaveney, Acker, and others for inspiring him in this.

Kaveney's comment is insightful, although it is not the full story. She readily admits to a 'Whiggish theory of pop cultural history' as part of her dismissal of comics in the 1990s (2007: 59) and there were many titles that indicated a significant change had taken place. At Vertigo, titles like *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2007) demonstrate a continuing commitment to long-form comics engaged with literary history and American politics. Similarly, DC's experiments with alternative comics and graphic novels under the Paradox Press and Piranha Press imprints suggest that the major publishers were well aware of the broader impacts of legitimisation provoked – at least in part – by their titles. However, although it is admittedly a broad sweep that does not acknowledge the many attempts to move comics beyond the superhero genre in the 1990s, it is hard to deny that Kaveney's commentary is broadly true as a history for the later Dark Age. In many works

commissioned by Vertigo in the 1990s, Gaiman's efforts to address the marginalisation or targeting of vulnerable voices had evidently failed, and the attempt to write these narratives with sensitivity and intellectual purpose abandoned. In these newer works, rape or graphic violence is reduced to 'laddish cliché'. Kaveney singles out much of the later Dark Age Vertigo work for criticism along these lines. *Hellblazer, The Invisibles, Transmetropolitan, Preacher* and *The Authority* all fall into the category of works that failed to capitalise on the promise of the early Dark Age but retained its conventions of content. These works are not without other merits, nor are they predictable or lacking originality in every aspect of their content. However, the use of violence, and particularly sexual violence, has become its own convention to signify 'dark' or 'mature' content.

In much the same way, the second-wave of Vertigo titles continued to build on the success of hiring writers from beyond North America, but this initial innovation did not extend beyond its proven successes. The result was a further influx of white, male, British and Irish writers, writing comics similar in appearance to the early Dark Age. As Kaveney also argues, these writers tended to 'a degree of snobbery about the American poor that they would have considered unacceptable' when writing about Britain (2007:59). The result was an observable trend of comics written by male voices that reduced the challenging of superhero comics' historic absence of sexuality and violence to a series of works virtually celebrating the fact that sexuality and violence were now fair game. The trend culminates in works like Mark Millar's *Old Man Logan* (2007). In a text that deliberately replicates the narrative of *Dark Knight Returns*, Millar writes the story of an aged Wolverine has retired, and is then called back into action in a world fallen to criminals. This conceit, however, is little more than a pretence for bloody violence and a series of jokes about the American rural poor. Millar is an easy figure to target, but his desire to hark back to the Dark Age in his writing, alongside his public willingness to use shock violence as a marketing method and defend his use of rape as a narrative tool to develop male perpetrator's characters (Riesman 2013) is clear evidence for Kaveney's points.

In retrospect, the continued promotion of violence as a way of selling superhero comics appears as simply as an articulation of the same undergirding forces of commercial and cultural capital that had created the early Dark Age. Perhaps, for all its innovation, the movement to align the superhero comic with literature and make writing and reading superhero comics a legitimate endeavour could not sustain itself. Commercial forces created an explosion of comics that capitalised on the market potential of the Dark Age (as was the case with *Sandman*), but continued to mine the same conventions rather than innovate in the directions demonstrated by the best known of the Dark Age texts, producing a glut of comics that resembled the Dark Age aesthetically but contained none of their transformative power. Ultimately, then, a combination of changing global politics and market forces within the comics industry kept a form of the Dark Age alive whilst emptying out the radical potential the content had promised. The aesthetic mode of the comics became its own institution: a marker of legitimacy that could be repeated without the purposes to which the aesthetic was first in service.

In both Kaveney's account and my own, there is a danger of creeping nostalgia toward the Dark Age as the period recedes from view. The early Dark Age was a time of transformation for the superhero comic, but should not be seen simply as a golden age of intellectual output lost or undermined by commercialisation after 1996. All the texts walked a tightrope between seeking legitimacy and the sales targets of a mass media corporation. Often, the tales were radical in one way, but conservative in another. Whilst they engaged with complex political thought, they also helped cement narratives of violence against women. Many of the problematic treatments of gender, race and sexuality that are (even) more obvious in works of the mid-1990s were present throughout the period and the lack of minority voices and characters in superhero comics has only recently begun to be challenged by new authors and hiring policies. New investigations of the texts have challenged the period on these grounds, and will continue to do so. At the same time, looking back on the period from a vantage point some twenty years on confirms that the

major texts of the Dark Age now enjoy the legitimacy sought by their creators. They have become canonical works for the growing number of comics and graphic novel courses in institutions of higher education, as well as aesthetic reference points for a new generation of superhero comics. As these texts repeat a path they saw in the Romance tales of the American nineteenth century, we would do well to remember the ways in which they figured their struggle for legitimacy, and the acts of rupture and revolution they contain.

Epilogue

Although the Dark Age as an aesthetic movement had essentially exhausted itself by 1996, it came to a concrete end some 16 years later – during the writing of this thesis. In 2012, DC announced that *Hellblazer* would be moved away from Vertigo and the series' protagonist reincorporated into DC's main publication operation under the title *Constantine* (Gerding 2012). The shift represented the final step of a major change to the operation of Vertigo, whereby the imprint was streamlined to focus only on creator-owned material and all intellectual property owned by DC was centralised. The decision removed a grey area between the superhero work-for-hire tradition and comics as the work of their creators that had been central to the Dark Age. *Watchmen*, *Sandman*, and the Dark Age Batman all began with characters taken from the early days of the superhero comic. Created under work-for-hire agreements, the rights to these characters were retained by the publishers, who could then sell new versions of the characters on the basis of the name of the author reinventing them. A direct legacy of the Dark Age has been the increased focus on the writer as creative agent, but in the early days this attention was in direct conflict with DC's exertion of ownership rights over the intellectual properties these writers had developed. Whilst the artist and writer were valorised and their names became promotional tools, the publishing house made money. Since then, legal debates over the ownership of properties such as *Watchmen* have become a feature of current comics culture – an industry tension only made more problematic by new markets for superhero film and TV products.

The gothic reinvention of the superhero comic had provoked Vertigo's creation, and in 2012 it appeared to be losing its essential *raison d'être*. Despite being the most obvious institutional legacy of the Dark Age, the restructure stripped it of the circumstances that had

produced its defining title – *Sandman* – and its longest-running – *Hellblazer*. Vertigo continues to operate but, as might be expected, the changes were not greeted with enthusiasm. Having held the post of editor since its inception, Karen Berger left Vertigo and DC in 2013 – shortly after the change was implemented. Despite the focus in this thesis on the texts, it is fair to say that for many, Vertigo, the British Invasion and the Dark Age were more closely associated behind-the-scenes with Karen Berger than with any single text, artist, or writer. If the Dark Age is considered in terms of a continuing process of production undertaken by a particular constellation of actors, it ends in 2013 with the end of *Hellblazer* and Berger's departure from Vertigo. After Berger's departure, her long-time second-in-command at Vertigo, Shelley Bond, took up the editorship. She resigned after only three years in the post. If it had not been definitive before, by 2016 any ongoing remnants of the Dark Age had been brought to a close.

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