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The Divine Sandman

Summary

The article discusses the intricacies of Neil Gaiman's comics work *The Sandman* through the lens of reception; particularly it examines how Dante Alighieri's masterpiece *The Divine Comedy* echoes through this epic comic. It not only tries to bring together (or rather deconstruct) these two profound works of art from diverse eras of human expression, it also discusses how two different modes of artistic expression – comics and poetry – converge on a metalevel. It furthermore treats the general nature of comics; denoting both their connection with literature and art in general, though in this respect also stressing the need for a separate study of the comics medium, and not as merely a genre of either literature or art.

Key words: *Sandman*, *Divine Comedy*, comics medium, word-picture cooperation, reception

Božanski Sandman

Povzetek

Članek skozi prizmo recepcije obravnava pomembno stripovsko delo Neila Gaimana, *The Sandman*, in se osredotoča na vzporednice s poetično mojstrovino Danteja Alighierija, *Božanska komedija*. Članek tako združuje ne samo dve epski deli različnih obdobj, temveč dva različna načina umetniškega izražanja – strip in poezijo. Pri razlagi stripa se nadaljnje poudarja povezava med literaturo in umetnostjo, izpostavi pa se tudi nujnost ločene obravnave stripa kot medija in ne zgolj žanra literature ali umetnosti.

Ključne besede: *The Sandman*, *Božanska komedija*, strip kot medij, soudejstvovanje besede in slike, recepcija

The Divine Sandman

1. Prologue

“*The page turns. Destiny continues to walk ... He is holding a book. Inside the book is the Universe.*” (Gaiman et al. 2003, 152)

What makes a great work of art truly great? Is it the complexity of its structure? Is it the profoundness of its message? Is it its relevance which stands the test of time? Is it its raw beauty and intricate artistic devotion to its subject matter? Or does its “greatness” merely depend on its placement in the history of the world of art? The easy answer to all of the above questions would arguably be yes; however, in any genre or medium there is much more to a profound work of art than meets the eye. We can infer that greatness cannot be created artificially, namely through external stimuli, but through the author’s perspective and vigor; essentially, his or her life shines through the work. However, such a work must also reflect not only the time it is produced in, but in one way or another it also needs to echo the past and be indicative of the future; in other words the work stands the test of time and surpasses its historic origin to be reflected not just in the author’s environment but especially in all cultures of the (human) world.

To be more specific, such works as Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Orson Wells’ *Citizen Kane*, Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9 in D minor* and Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman* all display the beauty and complexity of their respective mediums. These great works not only reflect the ingenuity of their artistic spheres but, through the authors’ perspectives, they become their most important and ultimate works – in other words the authors’ masterpieces.¹ The mere scarcity² of such works does not imply their importance; however, their ingenuity to reflect political, social, religious, artistic and other views unquestionably does.

Even though the above mentioned great works represent the artistic worlds of poetry, prose, drama, visual art,³ film, music and comics respectively, human artistic expression is generally more literature-oriented. The ability to understand and express oneself through words surpasses all other means of expression; at least that is the predominant notion that every one of us has been privy to.⁴ So it is that more emphasis is generally given to great works of literature than pictures for example. That does not imply that the intricacies of *Ulysses* surpass the complexity of *Guernica*, though the average person is still more likely to relate to the first work than the

¹ The broadest dictionary definition of a masterpiece is essentially an artistically and technically perfect work, which can become eponymous for the author and can take up the majority of the author’s life to complete (i.e. *The Divine Comedy*). Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/masterpiece>

² There are only a small percent of works in any art which achieve profound recognition (cf. Sabin 2010, 9).

³ Visual art in the literal sense of the words encompasses both works of art such as paintings (*Mona Lisa*) and literature, since words on paper are visual symbols which are observed through the sense of sight – just as paint on canvas. Nevertheless, visual art generally refers to paintings and sculptures, while literature has distanced itself from this definition.

⁴ Schools place more emphasis on activities connected with the left hemisphere of the brain (i.e. reading) than the right hemisphere (which enables our more artistic endeavors, i.e. reading pictures or comprehending music), since our culture teaches us logocentrism arguably holds precedence to abstraction. Source: <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~studskl/hd/hemis.html>.

latter, since cubism expressed in *Guernica* is still more obscure than the numerous literary allusions to the ancient Greek culture found in *Ulysses*. This observation certainly reflects not just the average person, but even prominent minds in literary theory. Coming from an academic field which dealt primarily with literature and less with art in general, I can also relate to the complexity of various art forms and movements, which can be overwhelming to a “literary mind”, as opposed to an “artistic soul”. In art, namely, even the most technical details are – due to the expressive nature of art – often felt rather than understood (as is the case in literature). Among the mentioned works, probably the most questionable or rather the least straightforward one is *The Sandman*. I dare to place a comics work – the “bastard child of words and pictures” that lingers in the purgatory of literary expression – in an illustrious group of great works for two reasons: the work itself represents the magnitude and potential of the comics medium, but more importantly, *The Sandman* is on the list because quite simply that is its place.

This article discusses the intricacies of *The Sandman* through the lens of reception; particularly it examines how the great poem *The Divine Comedy* echoes through this epic comics work. In other words, my intention is not only to bring together (or rather from my perspective deconstruct) these two profound works of art from two diverse eras of human expression, but also to observe how two different genres – comics and poetry – converge on a metalevel. In the process, I intend to portray the general nature of comics, discussing their inherent connection with literature and art in general, while in this respect also stressing the need for a separate study of the comics medium as not merely a sub-genre of either literature or art.

2. Chapter One – Enter Sandman

“It is **never** ‘only a dream’ [...] Here less than other places ...” (Gaiman et al. 2010, 96)

One of the best examples of a comics work reflecting on the complexity of its medium while stressing the intricate incorporation of prose and art is the comics mega-work *The Sandman*, which is considered among the finest creations in the comics medium. The works’ writer, Neil Gaiman,⁵ and a plethora of more than 20 artists of various roles⁶ meticulously constructed this comics masterpiece for almost a decade (1988–1996). The 75 monthly comic book issues or 10 trade paperback editions together produce finite epi story, in over 2000 pages, of fantasy and horror. The notion of finiteness is probably more straightforward in literature, where the tradition of following monthly installments of a favored work or a preferred author is not as rich as it is in the comics medium. Actually, comics as unified works (previously unpublished in monthly installments)⁷ are still relatively new and arguably few in number compared to the predominant series published in monthly episodes. American comics are notorious for their longevity and

⁵ Unless stated otherwise, I will for the sake of simplicity by stating only Gaiman’s name also refer to the illustrative artist, who contributed just as much to the completion of *The Sandman*.

⁶ The process of creating a comics work is anything but straightforward or linear, since the completion of a particular work may feature contributions from various artists: from the writer of the story, penciler, inker, colorist to the letterer and finally the editor, thus further stressing the cooperative nature of verbal and pictorial art in comics.

⁷ Such as the graphic novel, a more extensive and comprehensive type of comics work, which on one hand represents the maturation of the medium, yet has been because of its accessibility and mainstream acceptance financially exploited.

public appeal,⁸ so to not only end a popular comic, such as *The Sandman*, but rather imagine an extensive comics work with a finite end to start with, was more or less unheard of.⁹

Any kind of analysis of a (fictional) work requires a summary at some point or another. Providing a brief summary in would be, in the first instance, out of place in an article about reception; furthermore, such brevity is an impossible notion, one comparable to an unviable short outline of a great work such as *The Divine Comedy*, the complexity and rich intertextual elements of which require a detailed examination. Since the poem was originally written in Italian, the language barrier presents the first major obstacle in the reading process. I myself have to rely on English and Slovene translations of the work (Alighieri 1995; Alighieri 2005a, 2005b, 2005c), since not only is my knowledge of the Italian language slim, but the capacity to understand a complex work such as *The Divine Comedy* in its originality is even more daunting. When dealing with a translation, the reception of a work is not only more guided, but the ability to comprehend the work of art in its originality is hindered. Specifically, in poetry numerous poetic elements can get overlooked, while the beauty of the poem consequently gets lost. *The Divine Comedy* is composed of 100 Cantos, each of which utilizes the *terza rima*. While the Slovene translation used tries to convey both the artistry and the meaning of the poem by not omitting the rhyme, the English translation is more literal for the sake of better understanding. Such prose translations further stress the complexity of the poem, while focusing more on the intricacies of the poem rather than its artistic beauty.¹⁰ Additionally, most editions of *The Divine Comedy* are accompanied by complex notes, which are on one hand extremely helpful, yet they impede on the reading process and consequently the reader's reception of the poem can be overtly guided rather than experienced, which is the essence of this great work.

Nevertheless, despite its complexity (or rather because of it), the poem can be accessed on different levels. Just as a Dante scholar may come closest to seeing the poem in its full (moral) glory, a general reader may experience the work as an adventure story, where the protagonist succeeds in overcoming the odds and reaches the Divine presence. If we continue with the summary, just as *The Divine Comedy* can be oversimplified and merely viewed as Dante's journey through "Inferno", "Purgatorio" and ultimately "Paradiso" (or Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, respectively), the story of *The Sandman* focuses on the protagonist Dream of the Endless, who is the personification of dreams, his penultimate tragic end and ultimate immortality. The sheer complexity of structuring the relevance of various individual stories makes the work difficult to reflect upon during the first reading; a notion that is arguably even more stressful when reading *The Divine Comedy*. While this great poem relies on the beauty and meticulous arrangement of poetic language, the comics epic stresses numerous pictorial elements as the driving force of its visual narrative. Gaiman is notorious for shifting between stories that center on Dream and (or) his six siblings, called the Endless (Destiny, Death, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium), and stories that feature minor characters, thereby creating a dichotomy of tales that can only make sense when the reader

⁸ *Superman*, as the oldest and the first globally successful comics series is almost 80 years after its creation still published monthly, amounting to over 700 single issues. Source: <http://dcu.blog.dccomics.com/2010/06/24/bernard-chang-on-superman-700/>.

⁹ Truth be told, the Sandman probably emerged into a finite tale only after the first couple of monthly issues, which garnered enough intrigue from the readers that Gaiman was able to focus more on the progression of the story and less on keeping the series alive – even for the sake of cohesion and completeness, as is the case in many comics series (cf. Bender 2010).

¹⁰ Consequently further stressing the precedence of logical reasoning over holistic interpretation.

concludes *The Sandman*. The story incorporates various “local” comics characters (as well as some *Sandman* authors themselves), practically unknown to the general readership outside the DC¹¹ comics universe; however, their function is not arbitrary, as their minor roles unite the fundamental message of the work – namely its transcendence. In retrospect, this is a similar model to Dante’s great poem, which centers on the author’s beloved Florence of the late 13th century and thus features many local and, from a modern perspective, unknown characters. Further, Dante gives himself a lot of creative freedom, since his work freely features both fictional characters as well as historical figures, yet all characters – even Dante himself – are but a means of stressing the nature of *The Divine Comedy* and its message – the struggle with oneself in search of intellectual, spiritual and emotional fulfillment – which applies directly to the reader.

3. Chapter Two - To Hell and Back

“Life, like time, is a journey through darkness.” (Gaiman et al. 1993, 211)

Every journey of discovery and enlightenment requires the traveler to overcome the difficulties on its way. Just as Dante finds himself lost in the dark forest of error, and Dream becomes entrapped in a sphere in a dark cellar, so does the reader¹² of these words begin in a comics void. As Dante takes the first step towards darkness on his arduous path of illumination and Dream frees himself from his cell only to be thrust not into light but into darkness, so must the reader begin the discovery of the power of comics through their innerworkings.

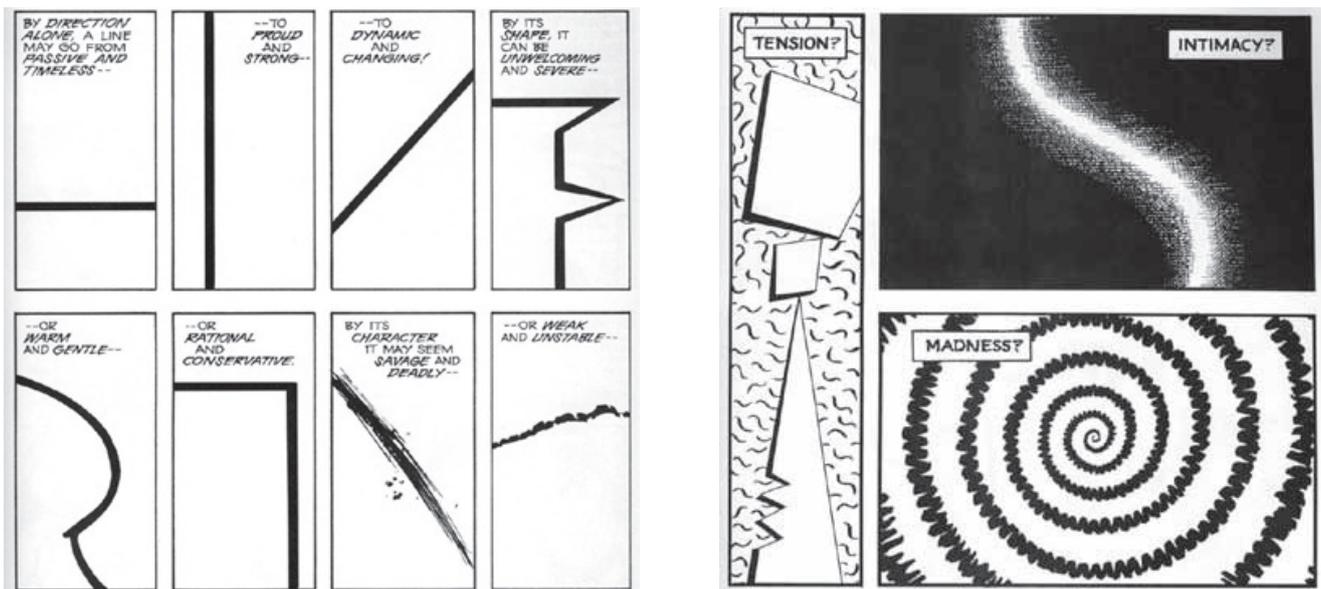
These operations may seem straightforward in a medium which operates with words alone; however, in a medium operating with words just as much as (if not more) with pictures, the task of the reader widens exponentially. They must not only separately infer the words and pictures, but more importantly deduce the meaning of the complex relationship between them. The medium in question is of course the comics medium. Although picture books and children’s books are part of literature as an art form (both of course incorporating pictures into their mostly word-oriented base), the complexity, intertwinement and interaction of the word-picture relationship in the comics medium surpasses its literature-based brethren. The unique relationship of words and pictures is the heart of comics. Although a particular work can be more word or picture-oriented, the reasons why comics are not a subsidiary of either literature or art are imbedded in the complex interaction and subsequent representation on the pages of every single comics work. Will Eisner states that “the format of comics represents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regiments of art [...] and literature become superimposed upon each other” (Eisner 2008a, 2). It is certainly not bold to claim that reception of comics requires more from the reader than literature or art individually, since in comics “the reader is expected to understand things like implied time, space, motion, sound and emotions. In order to do this, a reader must not only draw on visceral reactions but make use of an accumulation of experiences as well as reasoning” (Eisner 2008b, 48), as Eisner explains the “contract” with the reader. The process of reading comics as opposed to a verbal text or a poem can be quite different. Frank Miller notes that “the reason why most

¹¹ DC comics (along with Marvel, the largest comics company) was the original publisher of *The Sandman*.

¹² To avoid ambiguity, the term *reader* (unless stated otherwise) will mean *comics reader* as well and will, therefore, include the aspects of “reading” both words and images.

books are vertical is because [they are] prose, and we [do not] want to read lines of prose that are too long. But the natural way of reading comics is horizontally” (Eisner and Miller 2005, 12).

One crucial point needs to be stressed: pictorial images are more easily discernable than verbal elements. Our brain immediately processes the images before our eyes and there is no need for decoding these pictures, or the “...[instantaneous] received information” (McCloud 1994, 49), as Scott McCloud calls it. On the other hand, as each and every written language is made of abstract symbols, we therefore need prior understanding or “specialized knowledge to decode [this] perceived information” (ibid.) called writing. The following sequences of panels from McCloud’s seminal work, *Understanding Comics* provide a glimpse at some of the expressive potential of shapes.



Picture 1 (left). Expressive potential of shapes ... (McCloud 1994, 125)

Picture 2 (right). ... and pictures (ibid., 119).

Molly Bang for example discusses a similar notion, while further stressing the impact of color in pictures, in her work *Picture This: How Pictures Work*.¹³ Pictorial depiction is, therefore, the dominant factor in comics and this representation is what the reader relates to the most. Even though reception is unique to different art forms (from literature and music to art and comics),¹⁴ “participation” is more or less paramount in all of them – otherwise the works lose much of their power, relevance, artistry and beauty. Duncan and Smith further stress that “for a comic book to be effective, the reader has to be actively involved in creating process [...] Creators facilitate this process with their decisions about what to show and how to show it” (2010, 169). Reception of a comics work is predominantly a pictorial reception, where pictorial elements carry the initial response for the reader.¹⁵ Verbal elements come in second, even if they are masterfully conveyed and depicted, as in *The Sandman*. Eisner shares a similar idea;

¹³ For more information on the importance of understanding basic shape and color cf. Dernovšek 2009.

¹⁴ Will Eisner observes how readers have different reading experiences in other mediums, which influence each other (cf. Eisner 2008b, 69).

¹⁵ It is important to bear in mind that the so called silent comics (comics with no or with sparse verbal elements) convey purely a pictorial meaning. On the other hand, there are no purely “verbal comics”, because they would be firstly indistinguishable from prose works and secondly the (visual) base of a comics work is generally a picture into which words are rendered through captions and word balloons (and not the other way around).

In reality, action precedes words. In comics, therefore, the dialogue is actually conceived after the action is devised. [...] There is a different cognitive process between reading words and pictures. But in any event, the image and the dialogue give meaning to each other – a vital element in graphic storytelling. (2008b, 59)

The general definition of comics art by Eisner as “sequential art” (2008a, 1) or, further, as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (1994, 9) by McCloud provide the technical backbone from which essentially all comics’ ingenuity, distinctiveness and splendor arise. Duncan and Smith comment on the essential factor of the juxtaposition in relation to the comics narrative and reader viewership: “The reader performs an ongoing construction of meaning by considering each panel in direct relationship to the one immediately before it, as well as in the context of all previous panels” (2009, 141). While both comics and literature share this sequential aspect – the first employs image-to-image and panel-to-panel¹⁶ succession, the latter word-to-word and sentence-to-sentence succession – it is the visually dominating pictorial aspect and picture-word integration that distinguishes comics as a unique artistic branch.

The word-picture relationship in picture books or children’s books is supplementary; in other words the words and pictures represent the same notion(s) and meaning(s).¹⁷ However, the nature of this relationship in comics is far more complex. Duncan and Smith note that “the comic book form is at its most powerful when words and pictures go hand-in-hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (ibid. 146). However, not only can the meaning of a panel and the words within it only be understood through mutual cooperation; rather, representation can actually be intentionally conflicting. The following examples display the cooperativeness and disagreement of the word-picture relationship, respectively.



Picture 3 (left): Cooperation of verbal and pictorial elements (Gaiman et al. 2010a, 129).

Picture 4 (right): Word-picture conflict within a panel (Gaiman et al. 2010a, 129).

The left panel portrays through both verbal and pictorial description how the character Morpheus begins to exit Hell, as the hordes merely allow him passage. The right panel, however, pictorially indicates that he has managed to pass them unharmed, yet hope and success are in conflict with Lucifer’s words, which pledge Morpheus’ destruction. The right panel thus intentionally portrays not a hopeful image but in actuality a prelude to disastrous future events. This overall image is

¹⁶ The panel is the image the reader observes and encapsulates the static nature of the image.

¹⁷ McCloud for example calls this notion the duo-specific combination of words and picture (1994, 153).

actually even more stressed, since these two panels are part of the same page, thus implying how hope can instantaneously be thwarted.

Both Dante and Dream are gripped with fear before entering Hell. The first because of the unknown situation he finds himself in; surrounded by sights and sounds of horror, not to mention the debilitating inscription above the gate of Hell, warning all who enter to abandon all hope (cf. Alighieri 1995, 68). Dream's fear, on the other hand resides in his weakened state due to his imprisonment beforehand and the acknowledged greater power of Lucifer (cf. Gaiman et al. 2010a, 108–9). The greatest irony in this case is the fact that Dream himself is the king of nightmare in his own realm and an immortal being older than gods and worlds. As Dante (the author) places emphasis on the dangers of Hell by describing horrible punishments for the sinners, the artists of *The Sandman* create the horridness more pictorially than descriptively – as the comics form allows. Nevertheless, both respective Hells are acknowledged as ultimate dwellings of the damned,¹⁸ where no one, let alone the reader, desires to dwell.

An important difference in the journey to Hell in both works lies in the fact that Dream travelled there by his own volition, while Dante awoke confused in the dark wood of error, perhaps being guided towards this journey (through Hell) even before his actual guided journey (by Vergil, Beatrice and Saint Bernard, respectively) began. Nevertheless, we could claim that Dream was in essence also “forced” or rather inclined to go to Hell, since he was searching for an item vital to his existence. Further, Dream's first journey to Lucifer's realm was actually a prelude to his second and more important crossing into the land of the damned, when he tries to correct a grave error of judgment, though he is instead handed the keys to Hell itself, which in turn bring him more sorrow than joy (Gaiman et al. 1992, 88 and 166). The importance of a particular set of “keys” is stressed in Dante as well; however, they represent “supreme papal power, including that of absolving sins” (Alighieri 1995, 607), thus indicating papal corruption. Further, as Dante also reaches the final gate of Hell and Lucifer entrapped in ice, he in essence also acquires “keys” to Hell that lead him out of the deepest part of Hell and greatest evil towards the seven-storey mountain of Purgatory. In any case, Hell in both works represents the first major realm where both pilgrims face terrifying danger, confusion and most importantly sinners, through whose mistakes they gradually begin to learn the error of their sinful ways.

4. Chapter Three - The Change

“And the angel Remiel ascends into the sky of the underworld, confident that it has begun to change things. To substitute redemption for damnation, correction for despair ...”
(Gaiman et al. 1992, 217)

The essence of the journeys in *The Divine Comedy* and *The Sandman* is the notion of change. As Dante and Dream begin gradually and arduously to see the error of their ways, so is the reader urged to observe this change in order to hopefully achieve gradual transformation for both the self and the greater good. Since Dante (the character) is “merely” a human, while Dream is an immortal being, the whole concept of change can be expected to be actually easier

¹⁸ There are various direct references to *The Divine Comedy* in *The Sandman*, such as the wood of the suicides (cf. Alighieri 1995, 112 and Gaiman et al. 2010a, 112).

for Dante. Although we can claim that an age-old being should possess a much higher level of spiritual intelligence and virtue, it is the very immortal aspect of Dream that hinders his learning experience. He is an ageless being that has long ago settled in his (overtly) proud (and flawed) character traits and is thus actually deprived of a faster moral change than Dante, regardless of the human's sinful ways.

The notion of Dream's immortality is on one hand part of the story's portrayal of the main character as the all-powerful (while powerless at times), stoic and rule-driven individual, who has difficulties in getting close to anyone, yet begins to become more "human" through the story and despite his destruction prevails as another aspect of himself. The other notion of his immortality, however, resides strictly in the hands of the reader. The reader becomes attached to the character – and the protagonist – and relates to the predicaments that govern his portrayal; in other words this is the impossible position Dream finds himself in, where the notions of what he has to do and what he should do create a black hole into which he is ultimately sucked into. The comics medium has a unique ability to represent such characteristics and character traits through both words and pictures, thus providing the reader with not just the verbal perception and the pictorial one(s), but (more importantly) with the dual representation, where words and pictures as a unified comics language create a unique blend. Duncan and Smith stress that

the creative process [in comic books] is reductive, but the reading process is additive ... Creators reduce an imagined story to encapsulated fragments (pages and panels), and readers add those fragments together, along with their own background knowledge, to create a story. (2009, 154)

Dante and Dream share a similar position in their respective narratives. Dante the pilgrim undergoes the journey of ultimate moral experience, yet it is Dante the author who registers the path from sin to salvation. Further, the vital aspect of his *Comedy*¹⁹ is not just a personal experience or rather desire to better himself, but an aspiration to better both his local area as well as humankind. Dream, on the other hand, is, despite his gradual moral betterment, featured in a steadily and increasingly decaying state, creating a reverse message for the reader; as Dante's salvation is meant to be the reader's salvation as well, it is actually Dream's fall that the readers are meant to acknowledge as a tragic moral lesson. Gaiman also bridges the narrative gap between fiction and reality, since Dream visually – as a tall, striking, pale figure with black ruffled hair and dark eyes – resembles the author. His undeniable Gaimanesque (facial) features thus further create a powerful connection between himself and the reader, stressing his tragic end even more.

Arguably, Dream's appearance (as well as the appearance of other featured characters) is to some extent unique to a different penciler, inker, colorist or artist depicting him, yet his striking dark pose does not change. What changes are the nuances of various realistic (*The Wake*), expressionistic (*Worlds' End*), cartoonish portrayals (*The Kindly Ones*) and collage techniques (used for covers of various monthly issues). Such subtle changes not only affect the reader's response to any given character,²⁰ let alone the protagonist of an epic story, but also display the

¹⁹ As was his work originally titled. The adjective *divine* was attributed to his work later on. (cf. Mathewes 2011)

²⁰ Although (visual) change is part of Dream's character, the reader can actually become visually "confused" if the characters are depicted in various (dissimilar) artistic techniques; bear in mind that the initial visual depiction of a character is the first and the most

unique characteristics of comics. Different art conveys different emotion and *The Sandman* is notorious and quite meticulous for playing with art and the pictorial style of various episodes. The most obvious example is volume eight of *The Sandman*, titled *Worlds' End*. The essence of this issue is about storytelling; different narrators tell their tales in a Chaucerian manner; yet every story is portrayed by a different artist and consequently in a different style. Thus the change in narration is more evident, reducing ambiguity and conveying more meaning, which allows more emphasis on the story itself. A similar effect would be extremely difficult to convey with words alone, while just a glimpse of a different artistic style ushers the reader into a new pictorial experience, whereas the verbal part of the comic can be less strenuous in trying to account for the different narrative and artistic pace.

The change of pace, narration and pictorial portrayal nevertheless do not account for all of the different depictions of Dream. The character is embedded with change; he has many names,²¹ two of which are Morpheus (implying transformation) and Lord Shaper (he does not change merely through artistic styles but can present himself differently depending on which species he is in contact with), he changes the lives of beings he is associated with and he himself “changes” at the very end into a new aspect of dream. However, the greatest change occurs in the eyes of the readers, since they must fathom Dream’s final stage of destruction and ultimately wake from both the final tragedy as well as the realization that *The Sandman* is a finite tale.



Picture 5 (left): *Morpheus' final moments with his sister, Death* (Gaiman et al. 1996, 322).

Picture 6 (right): *The emergence of the new aspect of Dream* (Gaiman et al. 1996, 343).

The reader can pictorially infer Dream’s transition to another aspect of himself without it being directly stated through the text; Morpheus, namely, gradually sheds his dark clothes before meeting his end, thus visually appearing whiter and thus more like his follower, his son

important clue to his essence and consequently the strongest connection to the reader. Not just readers, but people in general make strong visual connections to other people and the world itself; therefore, in a long and popular work such as *The Sandman* portrayal of characters can be very delicate and straying away from an established appearance can be difficult for the reader (to accept). This issue could be compared to a slightly different portrayal of an actual person in real life.

²¹ Reflecting on his position and obligations, while indicating both his all-encompassing presence as well as actual lack of identity.

Daniel, who is depicted wearing all white. He is, therefore, in visual contrast to his “dark” father and he is also less emotionally rigid, as the conclusion of the story indicates. The final two installments, *The Kindly Ones* and *The Wake*, combine pictorial and verbal portrayal of Dream’s mental and visual transition into a “better” version of himself. Ironically, this process is in vain for the beloved protagonist and thus the readers’ reception of the work’s final tragic moments is exponentially more emotional both through the realization of Morpheus’ imminent death and the dual depiction of this state through the interrelated word-picture effort. On another level, the departure of the original Dream was obviously not well received by many readers (especially long-time fans of the series as first published). In this respect Gaiman helped the reader’s transition to the new Dream with displeasure, anger and sadness from Morpheus’ servant and later friend, raven Mathew, who initially refuses to accept Morpheus’ successor, even though Daniel is portrayed as a gentler and thus more “reader-friendly” aspect of Dream. Gaiman notes that Daniel “is not our Sandman; and he’ll never be. So we’re simply not going to like [him] right away” (Bender 2000, 216).

The reception of *The Sandman* as a complete work is thoroughly different from the reception of its 75 individual “chapters”. Ideally, a work that can be read in one sitting gives the reader a more comprehensive picture of its artistic essence and can provide a more insightful experience than a work which has to be read over a period of days or weeks. *The Sandman*, however, extends this reading period quite considerably. Even if the reader nowadays (as the complete *Sandman* collection is available) is able to finish one of the ten individual installments in a day, the process of “digesting” a 2000-plus page work with numerous literary allusions, intertextual elements and tremendous complexity is anything but straightforward. Although the completion of a work of such magnitude can be immensely rewarding, the inability to complete the work in one sitting hinders the reading experience as a whole and urges the reader towards further rereading(s). This notion applies perfectly to both *The Sandman* as well as *The Divine Comedy*.

Since *The Sandman* was originally published monthly, it was the monthly readers who were the ones responsible for the initial popularity of the series and the continuation of the story for eight years. However, since they could read only one issue (of 24 pages on average) per month, their reception of the work as a whole was greatly hindered. Holding their attention during those monthly periods was remarkable, let alone having to wait eight years for the saga to come to an end. Arguably, one could stress that the monthly readers would have ample time between issues for comments and discussion (even with the creators), therefore actually gaining a greater experience of the series. Still, I would argue that the sheer complexity and difficulty of structuring the relevance of various individual stories for the work as a whole kept the monthly readers far away from an advantageous position. Curiosity would have certainly kept them intrigued; however, the complexity of the narrative and the shifting focus between stories relating more directly to Dream and stories referring to minor characters could have just as easily strayed them away from the series.

Parallel to the notion of how long *The Sandman* was being created, the creation of *The Divine Comedy* was also an arduous process, from both the standpoint of the complexity of the poem as well as the fact that Dante had been writing it for over 10 years, most of which he spent in exile

(cf. Alighieri 1995, 46–52). The readership of the two works cannot be compared on various levels; there is an almost 700-year gap between their completions, they represent different artistic formats, and Dante's work gained recognition not just after the poet's death but actually in the following centuries. The legacy of *The Sandman* was more or less instantaneous, although it was (or rather still is) "relegated" to the appreciation of the comics industry and its readers, not so much the academic world or art in general (or the general public), as is the case with *The Divine Comedy*, which is not just appreciated as a great poem, but considered a grand landmark in all art.

Returning to the notion of change, one of the most important (narrative) elements in both works is gradual spiritual transformation. This change, however, does not occur just within the protagonists but within the readers as well, as they gain more knowledge – or rather wisdom – about the works (through reading and rereading), while they themselves change and morally grow just as much as Dante and Dream. Although Dante may begin his journey more in a state of *tabula rasa* than Dream, both characters initially display a great lack of knowledge, confusion and misplacement. However, their "learning process" shows gradual change for the better. Dante thus begins to see (God's) justice of Hell as he scolds the corrupt fallen Pope Nicholas III., delighting his guide, Vergil (cf. Alighieri 1995, 139–40), while Dream's brother, Destruction, acknowledges his sibling's moral growth (cf. Gaiman et al. 1993, 209). One of the most striking elements of both power and change in *The Sandman* is Dream's reconstruction of one of his nightmares, the Corinthian. Dream fictionally turns this serial killer (cf. Gaiman et al, 2010b) into a helpful character, whose second coming in return does a great service to the Dreamlord. However, as Dream makes the Corinthian better, he himself is still blind to his own flaws. The irony in this case is even greater since the Corinthian has teeth in his eye sockets instead of actual eyes.

However, the path to moral salvation is by no means linear and unproblematic, since both characters display lapses in their judgments. Dante thus once again feels sympathy for weeping unrepentant sinners further down in Hell and is immediately scolded by Vergil (cf. Alighieri 1995, 141–2), while Dream's sister, Death, scolds her younger brother for his ignorance (cf. Gaiman et al. 1996, 327–8). Although Dream's transformation is still more literal than spiritual as is the case with Dante, this change clearly cannot be achieved instantaneously; it is a learning process or rather an experience that requires one's journey to be completed. The fact that both Dante and Dream need guides on their respective journeys gives merit not just to the arduous task that befalls them, but actually reflects on the human condition itself. Every human being is guided through his or her life in some form or another; from everyone from parents to teachers, from mentors to partners. Just as Dante questions his guides and is helped by them through both praise and reprimand, so too does Dream turn – albeit belatedly – mostly to his siblings for advice (mostly his sister Death, who represents both death and life).

The mountain of Purgatory, which embodies the notion of change, is in stark contrast to the stages of Hell, where the torturous stay is permanent. The temporal nature of Purgatory is merely a means of reaching Heaven through seven stages representing the seven deadly sins. Dante becomes aware that the sin that plagues his soul (the most) is pride, which is presented as the worst at the stage of purgation. Both as a character and a poet he needs to find humility within himself, so as not to fall victim to the success of his great work. Similarly, it is pride which plagues

Dream the most as well. In his case, however, we come across not just arrogance and overtly prideful behavior, but lust as well, not to mention filicide, which is ultimately the main catalyst for his fall.

5. Chapter Four - The Wake

“Man may his fate foresee, but not prevent!” (Gaiman et al. 1996, 191)

Before Morpheus’ fall occurs, it is noteworthy to further elaborate on some of the elements that led to it, while stressing the intrinsic relation *The Sandman* has with *The Divine Comedy*. It has been already stated that both works feature both fictional characters and historic figures. This may not seem vital, yet the ingenuity of their incorporation in both works is what bridges the gap between fiction and reality, in essence representing how life imitates life (and vice versa). Both works are extremely rich in intertextual elements and incorporate numerous mythic and theological characters and notions in their narratives. In Canto XXVI of Purgatory Dante, for example, retells the story of the great Greek hero Odysseus (or Ulysses in Latin); however, he ingeniously modifies its outcome to fit into his narrative. Odysseus is placed in the circle of fraudulent sinners. Dante invents Odysseus’ downfall by playing on his most notable characteristics – intelligence and cunning. “Dante’s Ulysses combines these two aspects of the use and abuse of the intellect: his Ulysses is both the deceitful adviser ... and the intrepid, but presumptuous explorer.” (Alighieri 1995, 602) Parallel to this, Gaiman also uses famous literary works and characters for his narrative, namely Shakespeare (both as writer and character), as he retells his plays *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, respectively. As Dante in essence downplayed Odysseus’ fame, so Gaiman attributes the success of the character Shakespeare to an agreement with Dream (cf. Gaiman et al. 2010b, 128), where the latter would receive two plays in return for “the power to give men dreams that would live on after [Shakespeare was] gone” (Gaiman et al. 1997, 178).

This notion of immortality through great works directly reflects on Dante’s great poem, yet not a poem as a means for success but as a guide for betterment of humankind. As Dante journeys through the upper spheres of Heaven, he realizes he needs to assume the role of a leader, since this experience gives him the responsibility to convey his prophetic dream through his poem – his “golden fleece” (cf. Alighieri 1995, 539) – as much as he can, although he realizes his poem can at best only pale in comparison to the actual divine journey, which must be experienced by oneself, not learnt from another. The gap between humanity and the divine is far too great, and Dante’s divine vision was thus “inexpressible, inconceivable, and even unimaginable” (Alighieri 1995, 790). Gaiman also assumes responsibility for his own work, as he decides for the sake of artistic conclusion to conclude a popular comics series in spite of popular demand and presumably more (financial) success.

Perhaps an oversimplified analysis of both works may claim that they refer to the aspects of good and evil, plus their dual nature within each and every human being. Even though *The Divine Comedy* is greatly influenced by Christian beliefs, the large amount of theology within its 14,000 lines does not relate just to Christians,²² just as *The Sandman* does not relate just

²² Virgil, a pagan, is for instance the initial guide for the pilgrim as well as the reader, essentially the parent figure who helps us take our

to comics readers.²³ Within the narrative the reason for this might be the very dual nature of Dream, to which most readers can easily relate. On close observation, the seemingly all-powerful protagonist actually displays a very sinful nature; his most notable sins are excessive lust and pride, while his act of filicide, suicidal tendencies and arrogance could easily place him in various circles of Hell. From this perspective Dream's ultimate end is not tragic by any means but quite deserved. However, he remains a likable character, because his "sins" are rather the outcome of numerous interim events, which cause a chain reaction from which not even the Dreamlord can escape. For example: it was his lust for female beings that resulted in entrapment of one of his lovers, Nada, and the birth of his son Orpheus; it was his pride that prevented him from helping either of them; it was his own promise to Orpheus that led him to end his son's life, which in turn spurred his suicidal tendency. As the nature of sin is by no means straightforward in Dante, so are Dream's transgressions morally challenging to the reader. It is not the enormity or frequency of sin but the nature of the repentant sinner which is essential. What makes Dream a tragic character²⁴ is the fact that he repented and seemed changed for the better, yet his fate (or rather the Fates) caught up with him. Perhaps the ineffectiveness of Dream's remorse can be attributed to his solitary nature. If we observe the function of Purgatory, it becomes clear that repentance is a communal activity, where, unlike the egocentric sinners in *Inferno*, the repenting sinners pray, sing and cleanse themselves together of their past sinful ways (cf. Cook and Herzman 2001). Therefore, it could have been the very stoic and isolated nature of Dream that prevented his complete redemption. Even though repercussions should befall just him, they are directed towards his land, the Dreaming, as well, since he is the essence of his realm; in other words, the subordinates suffer just as much as their king does. This last notion of power and punishment again refers back to *The Divine Comedy*, since one of Dante's most fundamental objections was the misuse of power by the Church and how it ill-affected everything and everyone it controlled.

Dante's desire for an uncorrupt world is in stark contrast to the numerous references (through *The Divine Comedy*) of his actual exile, as both sinners and saints refer to the poet's banishment. A similar technique is used in *Sandman* as well, though it is expressed both verbally and pictorially; Dream's "exile" is more concrete still, since his fate is presented through destruction or rather resurrection. Such devices prepare the reader for the future events and since the outcomes in both stories are generally undesirable (for Dante the poet and Dream the character), the references reduce the shock in the eyes of the reader when these events come to pass.

Lastly, there is one more element that needs to be addressed, namely the importance of art in both works. It is only fitting that great works of art refer in various ways to art itself. The fundamentality and complexity of pictorial depiction in *The Sandman* has already been discussed; however, it is interesting to stress the incorporation of illustrations in the English and Slovene translations of *Divine Comedy* (used for this article). The art of the famous painters Sandro Botticelli and Gustav Doré, respectively, enhance the visual depiction of various parts of Dante's journey. However, on a more interpretative level, we can observe the notion of art itself,

first steps into the "hellish world".

²³ Among numerous prizes of *The Sandman* series is also the only literary award for a monthly comic in history, namely the 1991 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (cf. Bender 2000, 74)

²⁴ Apart from various striking references to Hamlet (cf. Gaiman et al. 1996, 296).

as presented in Purgatory, where the prideful sinners carry large boulders on their shoulders, learning humility. There the slabs of rock represent the material from which great statues were created. God is metaphorically sculpturing these sinners into works of art, to be sin-free and thus worthy of His presence and bliss in Heaven (cf. Cook and Herzman 2001). Parallel to this, there is an interesting reference to Michelangelo's famous fresco, *The Creation of Adam*, at the time of Dream's destruction.



Picture 7: *Uncreation of Morpheus* (Gaiman et al. 1996, 332–3).

As Morpheus touches his sister, Death, his existence ends; however, at the same time Daniel takes up the mantle of the notion of Dream. The panel – both through the reference to Michelangelo's work as well as in the dual nature of the yin-yang symbol in the center – marvelously depicts the dichotomy between life and death, immortality and resurrection, despair and hope; a great work of art incorporating another great work of art as an integral part of its portrayal at the most opportune time.

6. Epilogue

“Sandman is [...] about peering beneath the surface of things, and recognizing the importance of dream, myth and the transcendent in our lives.” (Bender 2010, 2)

While part of the essence of *The Sandman* can be attributed to the meticulous incorporation of elements from the great poem *The Divine Comedy*, the work of Gaiman and every other accompanying artist is mature, complex and artistically beautiful in itself. Just as Dante's masterpiece has had a profound influence on this comics work, so has the Bible, for example, been an inseparable “partner” in both creation and depiction of *The Divine Comedy*. *The Sandman*

is clearly not just a magnificent comics work, but a great work in any art form. However, its reception and even more so perception are, despite the work's complex literary and artistic beauty, difficult at best. Nevertheless, were it not for this complexity, the reading experience through the Dreaming would have been robbed of numerous literary and mythic allusions, Shakespearean references and visually striking artistic delights that Neil Gaiman and the numerous illustrators of genius have created.

While the future of comics might already be changing from the standardized book form towards a more digitalized and interactive product on the internet,²⁵ these changes reflect another aspect of individuality, compatibility and uniqueness of the comics medium. The essence of comics is both its greatest marvel and its gravest flaw. I refer to the ability of the medium to express itself both through short intellectually unchallenging and caricature-like comic strips just as much as profound graphic novels. Comics are used as commercials, and they are stereotypically presented to the general public by different media as low art or simplified stories, serving only as a means for animation, cartoon creation or film adaptation. Yet, at the same time they not only dissolve the illusion that exquisite pictorial and verbal elements cannot co-occur, but actually coexist in such a complex way that no other medium can relate. Comics are a medium of experimentation and unusual formats just as much as it will forever be the architect of colorful superheroes, who become pop-culture icons. Even though the substandard, overtly stereotypical or downright "bad" comics may forever impact negatively on the global perception of comics as a mature, independent and unique art form, they are appropriately part of the same "family" as such comics masterpieces as *The Contract with God*, *MAUS*, *Watchmen* and *The Sandman*, and they reflect the dual nature of comics as both a unique word-picture applicators as well as a form of expressing anything and everything that humanity has to offer.

I would like to end this article with more similarities between *The Sandman* and the *Divine Comedy*. The parallels between the two masterful works are evident through their mutual intricacy and beauty. Only once you have finished reading one or the other, will you be actually prepared to embark on the reading experience. As Dante's odyssey leads him from Inferno to Paradiso and ultimately God, so too does Dream suffer on his path of salvation, going to Hell and back to his "heavenly" land of Dreaming. However, he, as a being more powerful than gods, can find salvation only through destruction. Just as Dante reemerges as a new, morally enriched person with a divine understanding, so does Morpheus undergo a similar journey; however, he resurfaces as another aspect of "himself"; as another Dream, one that will learn from the mistakes and rigidity of his predecessor and will after the wake emerge through the reader with a greater understanding of Gaiman's masterpiece. Once you immerse yourself into *The Sandman*, you embark on a rollercoaster ride that fills you with appreciation and joy, making the reading experience turbulent yet unforgettable, and at the very end you realize that the epic saga was not a nightmare, but the sweetest of dreams.

"And then, fighting to stay asleep, wishing it would go on for ever, sure that once the dream was over, it would never come back ... you woke up." (Gaiman et al. 1997, 92)

²⁵ For more information on digital comics cf. McCloud 2000 and Dernovšek 2011.

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