Walking Corpses & Conscious Plants: Possibilist Ecologies in Graphic Novels

Julie Ann Bingham

University at Albany, State University of New York

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Walking Corpses & Conscious Plants: Possibilist Ecologies in Graphic Novels

An honors thesis presented to the Department of English University at Albany, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English and graduation from The Honors College.

Julie Ann Bingham
Research Advisor: Eric Keenaghan, Ph.D
Second Reader: Paul Stasi, Ph.D

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Abstract

In “Walking Corpses & Conscious Plants: Possibilist Ecologies in the Graphic Novel,” I examine how graphic narratives have historically been used to express political concerns; I then rate the impact of two contemporary works which imagine planetary crisis in relation to this context. Working with Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead and Alan Moore's Saga of the Swamp Thing, I aim to illustrate that the violent worlds depicted in each fiction attest relevant social critique. As a frame for this analysis, I turn to the work of philosopher David Kellogg Lewis. Using his model of modal realism, I argue that engaging ideas of alternate realities through graphic narratives can be beneficial to stimulating questions of political discourse among readers which might not arise otherwise.

Beginning with a consideration for early examples of sequential art and their social functions, the first of my three chapters builds a foundation for understanding how the modern comics form came into being. Next, I focus my attention upon the significance of the portrayal of violence in my two primary texts. Both works imagine spaces of total war but portray this experience through vastly different perspectives. Mainly, my analysis of Kirkman's work concerns how the presentation of the human body is linked to suicide bombers and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Here I apply the work of philosopher Adriana Cavarero, author of Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence, citing Kirkman's post-apocalyptic universe as a symptomatic expression of cultural concerns regarding ceaseless conflict and erasure of identity. Conversely, my interest in Moore's Saga of the Swamp Thing is motivated by his fusion of awareness into the environment. Moore's monumental revival of a marginally successful superhero demonstrates that certain themes, like natural preservation and dependency, may become more pertinent to discuss with the passing of time.
I owe an extreme debt of gratitude to Dr. Eric Keenaghan, Prof. Ineke Murakami, & Prof. Paul Stasi. Without your encouragement and guidance, this project would not have been possible. Thank you all for your fierce dedication, impeccably sharp wits, and continued support. I will be forever grateful for being fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to work with each of you.
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Introduction

My project examines the educational function comics perform in aiding the development of political awareness among readers through the presentation of violent content. Specifically, I'm interested in how works which belong to the horror genre express fears of inevitable social collapse. I believe that creating and engaging this material reflects a preoccupation with political instability and power dynamics. Furthermore, I argue that this dark content and its wide accessibility are especially important for the populations of democratic societies where these types of stories are sold since their aim is to expose potential dangers and provoke thought. Since human history is a narrative punctuated by conflict and competition, and because social order exists only if people agree to uphold it, it is necessary for the narratives recorded by people to address issues of vulnerability.

In this paper, I explore how serial comics and other graphic narratives reflect particular social moments and are therefore valuable tools for educational instruction and consumptive entertainment. These works represent space and time differently than narratives which are entirely constructed through language since they convey information through images as well as text. As a result, the self-contained worlds of graphic narratives can display different types of social critiques than their purely textual equivalents because they engage the senses and emotions of readers in different ways. By closely reading Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* and Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* through the lens of possibilism, I want to explore the significance of graphic narratives which imagine alternate realities in ecological crisis in relation to American political consciousness. Both serial comics successfully interrogate traditional perceptions of ontology by complicating where self-awareness appears; Moore places
cognizance into the environment itself and Kirkman eliminates it from the flesh where we expect to encounter it. Mainly, my analysis focuses upon the ways in which the respective creators represent violence aesthetically and question interpersonal relationships between its agents and opponents. Each challenges the stability of prevailing political conditions through content but also provides evidence reinforcing the perpetuation of cultural norms because of their success as mass-marketed commodities. The art itself does not act to change circumstance; but reading a graphic narrative is a performative process which enables an individual to reconsider experience from a new perspective.

To put it another way, the spaces considered in both *The Walking Dead* and *Saga* of the *Swamp Thing* are possible worlds. Although the graphic narratives themselves are artifacts, material objects of bound printed pages which occupy physical space, the characters contained within each story exist inside independent universes. We can contemplate a world in which corpses become reanimated with cannibalistic hunger or one where a sentient plant elemental controls all of the Earth's vegetation while maintaining separate from those circumstances. This type of engagement differs from total immersion within the possible world and is therefore distanced from actuality. However, this distance is useful when looking to identify the conditions which determine actuality and dictate apperception or how an individual perceives himself in relation to the environment.

Ultimately, my project examines the potential of graphic narratives as works of art and their limitations as commodities. I argue that graphic narratives are constructed in such a way that they are inherently suited for possibilist consideration and promoting
personal growth through the imagination of alternate perspectives. Artists, inkers, and letterers pay careful attention to the composition of the worlds they craft. Characters act as extensions of the environments they inhabit. Though graphic narratives include text, the medium strictly limits the quantity of its appearance. Rather than having long passages which describe unfolding action, graphic narratives utilize alterations in visual information to represent the elapse of time (McCloud, *Making 10*). Meaningful bits of information are emphasized in an additive or reductive manner except in the case of non-sequitur transitions; where the relationship between objects or words depicted is not rationally apparent (ibid). Moving from one image to the next in succession helps enliven the narrative. Deliberate moves like these alter the speed and frequency in which information is given; thus guiding the reader's pace. Variance between panel size, number, and content can indicate where to speed up, slow down, pause, or even reflect. Thus the process of reading these works differs from purely textual ones and can be better suited to pose questions about layered constructs like society or politics. By performing close readings on both Kirkman and Moore's works, I hope to explore of how these elements combine to make the form so effective in reaching viewers and expanding discourse on.

Using the possibility of alternate worlds, we can form a basis from which to test what is considered normal. In fact, the idea of possible worlds becomes an almost necessary stipulation when addressing the formation of moral or ethical values. Using the concept as a foundation, I want to explore how these fictional works function to inform political opinions. Possibilism is a huge component of philosopher David Kellogg Lewis' theory of “modal realism.” According to Lewis' book *On the Plurality of*
Worlds, modal realism is ultimately a strategy of determining the verisimilitude of intentionality as well as other theories which seek to define subjective experience. Modal realism hinges upon the claim that there are countless possible worlds which are real as experienced actuality*; and each differs only in content rather than kind. Each of these possibilia is then an irreducible entity and therefore is isolated from all others spatially and causally:

...there are no spatiotemporal relations at all between things that belong to different worlds. Nor does anything that happens in one world cause anything to happen at another. Nor do they overlap; they have no parts in common, with the exception, perhaps, of immanent universals exercising their characteristic privilege of repeated occurrence. (Lewis 2)

Even though external environments change as we move from one possible world to another, there remains some constancy which repeatedly manifests within subjects. Possible worlds are engaged in the realm of actuality; so even though there may not be a direct causal relationship between these possible worlds and ours, there is certainly a reason why they are imagined. This reasoning suggests a desire to identify specific natural qualities associated with conscious existence. Such considerations act as tests for moral ideologies or ethical beliefs. Interrogating these concepts can reveal when there are discrepancies between intentions and actions, or behaviors and their justifications—a valuable exercise especially in times of war and economic crisis. Lewis describes possible worlds as particularly useful devices for these types of comparison: “The other worlds provide a frame of reference whereby we can characterise our own world” (Lewis 22). This referential function is especially valuable in political discourse. When we can identify familiarity within spaces that appear totally closed from our own experience, we can reconsider subjectivity and address events or behaviors which are incongruous with

* The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provided this definition: “Actuality for x is the realm that includes x. Actuality for us is the maximal spatiotemporally related whole of which we are (mereologically) part.”
beliefs. Seeing a possible world envisioned in the space of the world we inhabit, yet apart from our experience of the actuality of that world, promotes our desire to identify with it. We are trained to see particular sets of meaning in any image, searching first for familiarity so we can determine the extent of our difference from this alternate reality.

According to David Kellogg Lewis' theory of “modal realism,” there are countless possible worlds each real as actuality because they are all self-contained. Each and every one of these possibilia is spatio-temporally and causally isolated (Lewis 2). These spaces can represent alternate realities where only certain variables distinguishing them from actuality have been changed. Hence, conceiving these spaces helps those who engage them to better understand their own perception of actuality and existence. According to Lewis, “One way to tell the truth about complicated phenomena is to say how they resemble simpler idealisations...there is no doubt that we do find it much easier to tell the truth if we drag in truthlike [sic] fiction.” (Lewis 26) Possible worlds like those envisioned by Kirkman and brought to life by the attention of a captive audience can reduce complex issues like extreme permeating violence to their most basic essence. Thus possibilia remove factors like how features such as national affiliation or race differentially affect violence, factors which provide rationales/excuses for individuals to sidestep or avoid straightforward analysis of prevailing conditions. Instead, taking Lewis' model and considering the world of The Walking Dead as a total entity which can be used as a point of reference, it is plausible to conduct an interrogation of the causes and consequences of severe violence. Further support for this argument comes from the literary criticism of author Mark Ledbetter, whose book, Victims and the Postmodern Narrative, Or, Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing describes
the potential of narrative to act as an affective and educational tool which can help
develop ethical awareness. According to Ledbetter:

...we live in a world unpredictable and unsafe where chaos rules, where perhaps
the most apt metaphors for our existence come from a language of apocalyptic.
Indeed, such a notion suggests that we look all the more passionately for worlds
which we can control and for events that are self-serving (2-3)

Turning to fictional or imagined spaces to examine social problems in isolation can be an
extremely valuable exercise. Also, considering hyperbolic examples of pandemonium
and civil unrest can prompt consideration for current affairs which might not necessarily
be described by a fictional work but are nevertheless comparable.

Kirkman's post-apocalyptic zombie fiction is a logical response to the political
climate following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the wars which
followed. In transforming each deceased body into a dehumanized mechanism for re-
enacting the same transformation upon others, Kirkman forces readers to reconsider how
they view the human figure and interact with it. After seeing fellow citizens perish as a
result of the actions of suicide bombers, Americans have already had to adapt to the
possibility that a seemingly normal person might use his or her body as a weapon.

Similarly in The Walking Dead, each person is a threat to every other living person's
survival. As memory, personality, and character do not transcend death, everyone is
potentially an enemy. To fully explore the significance of this condition in relation to
actuality, I turn to Adriana Cavarero's theoretical work Horrorism: Naming

Contemporary Violence. Her concern rests with a particular type of violence that targets
the helpless; and once experienced, totally reshapes and numbs those who've been
subjected to it. I argue that The Walking Dead is a quintessential portrayal of this type of
violence since it completely upsets the presence associated with the human body: each
zombie exceeds death as every reanimated body becomes a harbinger for more destruction. The ecological relationship we experience as readers is filled with suspense and tension, a tone mitigated mainly through the perspective of the graphic novel's protagonist, Sheriff Rick Grimes. Though we are guided to relate to Rick from the onset of the narrative, as time progresses and he becomes witness and subject to more violence and damage, the relationship becomes strained. I trace these shifts against circumstantial conditions like the absence or presence of community, family, security, supplies, and stability in order to analyze the goal of the creative work in generating social affect. I believe that the presentation of Rick's character and his struggle to maintain his ethical ideals while attempting to preserve his body and sanity holds a great deal of significance in regards to the present climate of American politics.

Whereas Kirkman's characters desperately cling to a faint and futile hope for civilization in the face of ever-changing power relations, Moore's text introduces us to a totally different possible world. Through the possible world of the Swamp Thing, I argue, Moore envisions a solution to Kirkman's seemingly unconquerable pessimism. His work is inherently different, though, because it was created earlier and resurrects a character first introduced to the public during a period of reform and environmental consciousness. Swamp Thing was created by Len Wein and Berni Wrightson, debuting in DC Comics' House of Secrets #92 in July 1972. Reviving and adapting their idea, Moore's figure comes into being in a moment on the cusp of planetary crisis. The character thus straddles two distinct periods: he is first informed by a burgeoning public interest in the adoption of pacifism and increase in environmental awareness and secondly through how these attitudes came to influence social life over time. By creating
his protagonist through the fusion of science and the natural world, Moore's text deals
directly with the re-shaping of consciousness concurrently with environment. Moreover,
because this transformation occurs as a result of the interference of the military-industrial
complex, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* implicates ideology in the perpetration of violence.
Comparing these two narratives will reveal parallel attitudes and intersecting concerns
about the ability of socially constructed institutions to protect the citizens they've been
designed to serve. What is unique about Moore's view is that it complicates the
perception of a simple dualistic relationship between those who enact violence and those
who are subject to it by indicating the influence of social climate and environment.

Wrapped up within these considerations is the problematic motif of accurately
representing the body. Spatially the body becomes representative of not only the singular
person to whom it belongs, but also as a component in defining community as a whole.
Take, for example, the way in which citizens make up the political body of a nation: this
particular ecological relationship can determine how population reflects representation
and demonstrates how sexuality and reproduction are wrapped up within the economy of
survival. In my final chapter, I look into the significance of Moore's treatment of
community and exploitation in the first issue of his collaboration with artists Bissette and
Totleben, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #21, “The Anatomy Lesson.” This issue deals with
inconsistency between one's body and identity as a result of violent interference. When a
malicious act of sabotage causes scientist Alec Holland's lab to explode, his remains fuse
with the swamp in Huoma, Louisiana where he was working. It is from this turbulent
explosion that Swamp Thing is formed. His existence is a point of confusion and its
resolution poses questions about how the fusion of identity to environment can challenge
the validity of singularly contained subjectivity. Mainly what this issue contends with is rectifying the false belief that Swamp Thing was once human. Instead the narrative systematically proves that the true Alec Holland perished during the explosion and Swamp Thing is an entirely different entity. The creature's misconception of identity sets the stage for questions regarding the embodiment of consciousness.

In reviving a mainstream character that was developed during a time of growing environmental awareness, Moore and the rest of the creative team involved with producing *Saga of the Swamp Thing* raise important questions about the Earth as a habitat, an ecosystem, and human dependence upon its natural resources. By engaging the work, readers fluctuate between states of consciousness; they literally trace the roots of consciousness down to the organic and bounce back and forth between futuristic science fiction concepts like universal awareness and bodily transformation. The allegory of the Earth's vegetation existing as an interconnected network with self-awareness imagined in the narrative is a cautioning tale when compared to our own notion of actuality. Embodying this consciousness forces readers to interact with it differently, as it seemingly inverts power relations and transforms the way characters interact with nature and one another. Considering how this work differs from the treatment of bodily transformation in *The Walking Dead* can be valuable in understanding counter-culture attitudes and mainstream concerns with respect to historical moments and our present understanding of how they have influenced the time we call now.
Works Cited


Chapter I: The History of Comics and its Connection to Politics: Assessing the importance images have had in informing public ideals and ethical standards

“And you who wish to represent by words the form of man and all the aspects of his membrification, relinquish that idea. For the more minutely you describe the more you will confine the mind of the reader, and the more you will keep him from the knowledge of the thing described. And so it is necessary to draw and describe.” (Leonardo Da Vinci, reproduced Inge pg. 132)

Graphic narratives, or stories which rely on images to convey information and advance plot, have been used for centuries to record political developments or illustrate significant changes in power relations. In order to have the resources to create and exhibit a work commemorating a particular event, though, one must have the capital to perform such a task and anticipate an audience to receive it after its completion. Thus historiography reveals that subjectivity, or individual perception, is strongly related to political subjection.

The mass produced comic strips which appeared weekly in newspaper publications during the late nineteenth century exemplify the rapid growth of industrialization as commodities while simultaneously representing attitudes about the values of the period through their content. The predecessors of this honed sequential art form reveal a great deal about the time periods in which they were made. Graphic narratives existed even before the printing press was invented in the middle of the fifteenth century. A commissioned embroidery known as the Bayeux Tapestry illustrates William the Conqueror's acquisition of power as the first Norman king of England. Depicting the events of 1066 through pictorial representations and accompanying descriptions stitched in Latin, the work preserves a historical record from a distinct perspective (McCloud Understanding 12). This artifact conveys information about monarchism, the power relations between individuals living in that system, and their relationship to religious ideology. Comics historian Scott McCloud identifies several
other early works which demonstrate control of sequential presentation as important steps in the development of comics. These examples include: a pre-Colombian picture manuscript discovered by Cortes circa 1519 depicting the exploits of a military and political champion (ibid. 10) and a series of religious illustrations about Christian martyrdom completed in 1460 titled “The Tortures of St. Erasmus” (ibid. 16). Graphic narratives were used to literally construct legends, presenting icons that memorialized casualties as men of honor, martyrs, or even as enemies. In these early works, topics of violence, death, war, and myth were typically prevalent. When examining the function of contemporary graphic narratives, it's important to consider these roots in context with the developments and changes in society and technology which helped lead to their eventual creation.

Arguably, the most prevalent and widely available kinds of graphic narratives in the United States today can be categorized as comics. A term with numerous connotations, “comics” can specifically refer to the recognizable form in which certain items were produced. This nomenclature is used to describe an artistic medium for narrative expression and is often applied to works of varying length whose content may, but is not always expected to, elicit a humorous response from readers. By identifying misconceptions regarding the evolution of the form, a more accurate understanding of its potential can be identified. This knowledge can impact reading and communication, enabling critics and enthusiasts alike to more accurately express their ideas regarding their encounters with examples of the form's enactment. Instead of considering comics as a catch-all, I'd like to point to some qualifying criteria and outline a brief history before performing closes reading of my two primary texts, *The Walking Dead* and *Saga of the*
According to McCloud, comics can be defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (Understanding 9). Comics here names a narrative format, or medium, rather than a specific object. Differences in artistic rendering and content serve as distinguishing qualities that set individual works apart from one another rather than doctrines for creative expression. According to Hillary Chute, “comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal—or use one simply to illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously [sic]; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning” (Comics as Literature 452). For this reason, comics have a unique power to impact readers by adding an aesthetic dimension to the classification of experiential perspectives. In other words, when one engages a comic he or she must employ cognitive strategies to form conclusions about topics he or she is not physically present to witness or interact with personally. Each of the choices made during the creation of a comic carries a particular weight; the manner in which content is artistically rendered will call to mind certain ideas within the mind of the reader who is engaging the text. Arguably, the medium mimics subjective experience in a closer fashion than a purely textual narrative does by relying upon representational visuals or icons which require the interpretation of the individual engaging the text. Even if a reader is able to automatically associate an icon with its correct reference as soon as it's encountered, the object or idea the icon represents has been considered through a new perspective. Prompting readers to seek information and meaning by identifying specific
representations or omitted details, the design of this form can empower viewers to contemplate complexly veiled social issues.

Seeing information expressed through an alternate point of view, for example through the perspective of a fictional character, provides the reader with an opportunity to question the validity and the verisimilitude of his or her own perceptions. Ideally, this would be an empathetic exercise that would be beneficial for people to recognize their relationship with others who also inhabit the same world but whom they will never personally meet. It is community building through imagination—an exercise by which a person comes to have a better sense of him or herself by recognizing dependence upon others. Developing this sense of identity as constructed by one's relationship to community is crucial for the progressive functions of learning and solving problems.

Despite this potential, the form has struggled to shake off the negative connotations of its association with a juvenile audience. To understand how artists and writers have coped with, and at times even capitalized on this assumption, it's helpful to explore how graphic narratives have developed and changed over time. Comics have had a link to education since their beginnings. It's widely accepted that a Swiss schoolmaster, Rodolphe Töpffer, invented the form commonly known as modern comics in the mid-nineteenth century (Chute 455, Tabachnick 8, Picone 301). One example of Töpffer's early works is *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois*. First published in 1837, it was translated and distributed in the United States by 1842. Töpffer's cartoons were divided into sequenced panels, contained by borders, and paired with descriptive captions (Picone 301-302). According to McCloud, Töpffer's work “featured the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe” (*Understanding* 17). It seems logical that Töpffer's
instructional profession helped him to realize the benefits of displaying information in such combinations and anticipate how this style might appeal to readers. Although he connected verbal and visual information to produce a narrative in *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois*, other artists and authors had worked with blending these techniques many years before Töpffer's work became popular.

Sequencing, especially, had been used deliberately as a device to instruct audiences toward understanding a particular message. This consciously constructed representation of chronology could be the most straightforward way to illustrate connections between past events and their ensuing outcomes. Furthermore, by documenting, analyzing, and representing a particular viewpoint through the construction of a graphic narrative, an artist could influence a viewer's perception of the topics contained within his work. These intended educational aims for moral, and often political, instruction manifested in works created long before Töpffer's.

Unlike McCloud, other historians like Robert C. Harvey, have pinpointed the emergence of sequential narrative even earlier, with the work of the English painter William Hogarth. Hogarth's moralistic series of six paintings titled, *A Harlot's Progress*, was first exhibited in 1731; they illustrate, in sequential order, the plight of a girl who becomes a prostitute and later dies of venereal disease (Harvey, *Comedy* 77). When the title is considered with the bleak ending of the series, it becomes obvious to the viewer that the piece is somewhat of a satiric social commentary. Each image is accompanied with a textual caption that serves an explanatory function, providing a description of the character Moll Hackabout and the location in which she is depicted. Captions are generally used to demonstrate a character's thoughts or to function as a narrative device
rather than show dialogue (Lyga & Lyga 161). This method of conveying information was the dominant function of text in eighteenth century comics for a number of decades.

Hogarth had a vested interest in using his talents to communicate ideas about social standings to the masses. In this group of paintings, there is a clearly identifiable character and the inclusion of a setting which would be familiar to his intended audience. Clearly, his intentions were to evoke an emotional response among viewers beyond pure appreciation. Rather, the tragic series of events depicted seems to work to evoke sympathy, empathy, and fear. From the perspective of an onlooker who would be expected to interpret the work of the artist, it becomes evident quickly that there are ways to prevent the ruin Moll experiences from befalling others. Beyond Moll's own failure to avoid this fate, the concern and outreach of others who cared for her well-being would have spared her suffering and bleak death. What Hogarth's work illustrates most clearly is an impending and bleak future if similar conditions of exploitation are ignored, encouraged, and not acted against by other individuals. Many of his other works expressed this sentiment and helped draw audiences together by providing a point of entry to begin discussion on the development and maintenance of community values.

James Gillray, considered by many to be the first political cartoonist, used captions to satirically critique Britain's advances into war in *John Bull's Progress*. First published in 1793, this four panel series personifies the United Kingdom in the character of John Bull. John and his family are first shown living comfortably before he leaves for war; but this changes quickly though. His family is depicted suffering war's ravaging effect after his departure. Ultimately, the once portly John Bull returns to a damaged home as a gaunt, crippled amputee (Tabachnick 8).
Another artist who worked with Gillray and influenced the development of modern comics was Thomas Rowlandson. Rowlandson first published “The Schoolmaster's Tour” in Rudolph Ackermann's *Poetical Magazine* in 1809 (Tabachnick 8). The work was printed from a series of engraved plates that were paired with descriptive verses by William Combe. As a result of its serial success, the work was re-issued as the *Tour of Dr. Syntax in the Search of the Picturesque* three years later in 1812. This bound album of the serially published work could be said to be a precursor to comics as we know them today. In fact, this reissued album was so popular that it was issued in a fifth edition the next year. Rowlandson capitalized on the public's infatuation and curiosity with this character, creating new narratives based on new experiences: *The Second Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of Consolation* (1820) and *The Third Tour of Dr. Syntax in Search of a Wife* (1821) (Tabachnick 8). Ironically, the protagonist's name calls attention to a facet of narrative and linguistic communication: syntax. Through this clever incorporation, readers were perpetually reminded of the ways in which this particular story was not merely limited to the content envisioned by its creators. The work was informed by the past, including all of the individuals responsible for developing and reinforcing linguistic structure, and was also simultaneously acting as a vehicle contributing to this larger sense of an intertwined community. Redrawing Dr. Syntax and expanding the narrative surrounding him, Rowlandson was a pioneer of enlarging the canon of graphic narrative. As the success of this graphic narrative reveals, collaboration was not an uncommon practice when producing such works.

Like Rowlandson's initial publication of the illustrated Dr. Syntax stories, comics were mainly released in serial publications. One of the earliest and most widely read of
these forums was a French periodical called *Le Charivari* that was issued weekly from 1832-1937. In response to its success, an English competitor named *Punch* was released in 1841. This periodical was credited with helping to coin the term “cartoon” during the first two decades of its operation. *Punch*’s more humorous counterpart, *Judy*, played a significant impact in the history of graphic narratives and comics as well. Charles Henry Ross’ vagabond character, Ally Sloper, made his first appearance in *Judy* on August 14th, 1867. Over the next twenty years, Sloper’s canon would grow from a few simple newsstrips into an extensively developed collection of larger narratives. In 1873 several of Ross’ strips were gathered and reprinted in *Ally Sloper, A Moral Lesson*; arguably this was the next stage of development which advanced the idea of the comic book format we are so accustomed to seeing nowadays (Sabin). Even more closely linked to our modern expectations for comic books was the eight-page weekly publication dedicated solely to Ross’ creation called *Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday*. It was released on May 3, 1884, and ran for nearly forty years afterward.

During the time of Sloper’s publication, numerous examples of comics were created and distributed throughout Europe and the United States. Take Wilhem Busch’s comic about two mischievous young boys, *Max and Moritz*: when it was translated into English and released in America in 1871 it helped solidify the association between the genre and children (Tabachnick 9). Accordingly, with the advent of color printing in 1896 many American comics helped to reinforce that association on their own. Richard Fenton Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley*, which featured a character known as the “Yellow Kid,” was one such example. The Yellow Kid’s appearance differed from many comic strips because it was drawn in a single, unified space without borders dividing the portrayed
action into panels (Cohn 45). As circulation increased, however, more artists were given the opportunity to publish their work too. Their drawing styles sometimes reinforced expected standards and other times introduced new elements that many other artists came to adopt as conventional devices. For example, Rudolph Dirk's *Katzenjammer Kids* was the first comic in which characters expressed dialogue through the use of speech balloons; it was released in 1897 (Suddath). Across the Atlantic in France, Louis Forton began using the technique in his 1908 bande dessinée, or drawn strip, *Les Pieds nickelés* (Picone 302).

Following these developments, numerous artists began incorporating these techniques into their own work. The use of speech balloons allowed artists to more clearly illustrate interplay between characters and thus demonstrated interpersonal relationships in more detail than captions alone could. In America themes of many popular works remained centered upon issues of race, ethnicity, and social class. George McManus' *Bringing Up Father* humorously illustrates the conflicts faced by a nouveau-riche Irish family; the strip's main character Jiggs is constantly trying to revert to his old working class lifestyle while his wife, Maggie, and daughter, Nora, are attempting to gain social status. This series ran from 1913 until 2000, long after McManus had died (Tabachnick 10). In 1914 Harry Hershfeild released *Abie The Agent*, a comic strip that dealt with the difficulties faced by Jewish immigrants adjusting to life in New York city (ibid). Milt Gross also incorporated his experience as an American of Jewish heritage in his work. His comic *Nize Baby*, first published in 1926, poked fun at Yiddish inflected English in exaggerated and humorous combinations (ibid). It's possible that these exaggerated portrayals of stereotypes helped to motivate other creators like Jerry Siegel
and Joe Shuster to come up with characters who they could be proud of to represent their heritage. In 1932 the two created Superman, a champion who faced a great deal of adversity non unlike antisemitism faced by Jewish individuals. Forced to hide his true identity on Earth, Superman had been born on the planet Kal-El which means “God Light” in Hebrew (Tabachnick 10). This heroic character became the model for a new archetypal comic; however, his narrative would not be issued in print for another six years. Seigel and Shuster's success was largely wrapped up in an imminent move away from the publishing sponsored by newspaper syndicates that came to fruition later in the decade.

It wasn't until 1933 that there was a significant shift in the way comics were assembled, presented, and distributed which enabled Superman to achieve extensive popularity in the coming years. Max Gaines completely changed the industry when he suggested using comics as promotional gimmick to increase product sales. As a salesman working at Eastern Color Printing, Gaines and sales manager Harry Wildenberg devised a plan to boost sales for clients like Proctor & Gamble by cheaply selling comic reprints and asking customers for a label from one of the company's products with the advertised fee for the publication (Inge 139, Harvey, The Art 17). The idea blossomed into Funnies on Parade and was adopted by a number of other businesses including Canada Dry, Kinney Shoes, and Wheatena (Benton 15). Though the first run with Proctor & Gamble was only thirty-two pages long (Harvey, The Art 17), each of the comic books produced for these new clients was typically sixty-four pages long and measured 7.25” x 10.25” (Feiffer 14). Rather than continuing to take a mere fraction of the profits earned by these publications, Gaines saw a market for the product outside of promotional corporate
sponsorship. He designed and produced a comic book of reprints specifically for consumer sale: “When it sold out at ten cents a copy, he engineered a successful sequel in May, Famous Funnies No. 1; and when the second issue of Famous Funnies hit the stands in July 1934, it signaled the arrival of the monthly comic book” (Harvey, The Art 17). Despite Gaines's innovative sales strategy, his product still differed from what our modern idea of what a comic book should be because it did not contain original material.

Around the same time period, though, other businessmen were experimenting with the form's potential who realized the value of releasing new content. One of these individuals was Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a former cavalry officer who had risen to the rank of Major before resigning and becoming a writer of adventure stories. Wheeler-Nicholson formed National Allied Publications, a company whose first publication was released in black and white and called New Fun; it was cover-dated February 1935. Although the company would later blossom into one of the industry's giants, this title and other subsequent ones achieved only marginal commercial success (ibid).

Meanwhile, industry pioneer Max Gaines was fairing very differently. After leaving Eastern Color Printing, Gaines began working for the McClure Newspaper Syndicate where he introduced his new concept. Next, he formed a partnership with George Delacorte of Dell Publishing. Together they produced thirty-five thousand copies of Famous Funnies. Using Funnies on Parade as a model, Gaines's collaborative effort with Delacorte retained the same amount of pages and dimensions as the earlier publication. Unlike the first efforts, though, Famous Funnies had an innovative new marketing strategy. Corporate middlemen were cut out of the equation as copies were distributed to and then sold directly from newsstands. Besides this publication, the team
also produced *Popular Comics* in 1936 and *The Comics* in the following year (ibid). Unlike these publications which featured reprints, during this period Wheeler-Nicholson's company released *More Fun* and *New Comics* which contained all new material. Only one other firm, called Comics Magazine Company, was competing with National Allied Publications' strategy of issuing material which had not already been released. Run by William Cook and John Mahon, Comics Magazine Company revolutionized the production of comics' content by procuring material from the factory like comic art shop run by Harry A. Chesler (ibid). Here artists and writers worked for weekly salaries and used assembly-line style methods of piece by piece collaboration to turn out stories cheaply and quickly. Even with this cost efficient business model, National Allied Publications struggled financially. In an effort to combat these fiscal setbacks Wheeler-Nicholson forged a partnership with his printer, Harry Donenfeld, to whom he was in debt. Through this merger, the company became Detective Comics, Inc. Its first issue was released with the cover date of March 1937 (Harvey, *The Art* 18). As the first singularly themed comic book, the publication inspired Wheeler-Nicholson to pursue a similar venture called *Action Comics*. Ultimately this title would achieve monumental success by publishing Shuster and Siegel's story, *Superman*, in 1938; but, this was not before Donenfeld forced Wheeler-Nicholson out of DC's ranks (ibid).

Alternately, Gaines' innovative sales strategies propelled him onto the fast track to success. Working with Jack Liebowitz and Harry Donenfield on another of his ventures, Gaines began publishing new material for All-American Publications in 1938. While Gaines worked for All-American, the company was responsible for releasing titles like William Moulton Marston's *Wonder Woman* in 1942, written under the pseudonym
Charles Moulton. Marston hoped his heroine would enable women to realize their full potential as the country's men were being drafted into war (Tabachnick 10-11). All-American was not the only company releasing superhero narratives, though. The period between when the first issue of Superman was released in 1938 until the mid 1950s is colloquially referred to as “The Golden Age of Comics.” During this period other seminal and timeless heroes made their debut and catapulted to stardom. DC Comics, for instance, published Bob Kane and Bill Finger's Batman in 1939. Following Superman's debut in DC's first issue of Action Comics, Timely Comics introduced the Human Torch in its first issue of Marvel Comics. Timely Comics, which eventually would change its name to match the success of its bestselling title, also issued Jack Kirby and Joe Simon's patriotic hero Captain America the year following the first appearances of Batman and the Human Torch. In many ways, the escalation of political conflict and onset of war fueled and encouraged the development and sale of new comic narratives featuring superheroes. According to Harvey, “During the war, 90 percent of the DC titles had been superheroes, after the war, that percentage declined to two-thirds; then by the end of the decade, to about 50 percent” (The Art 40). The dichotomous struggle between the Axis and Allied powers warranted explanation for young readers (Inge 103). Also, comics were an enjoyable diversion for deployed servicemen which, “helped them while away the idle periods of unpredictable duration that customarily intervened between short spurts of feverish activity” (Harvey, The Art 16). Apart from the advantageous nature of the medium to support this type of interrupted reading, the content of the works could also boost morale. As Americans waged war against totalitarian powers and fascist nations responsible for committing unthinkable atrocities, they may have yearned to see
representations of such villains slain and brought to justice. While performing an
instructional function for youth, the works could be read as possible vehicles for
promoting indoctrination too. Even though these comics offered their target audience an
opportunity to escape the harsh realities of wartime through fiction, they also were
constructed with content with a distinct focus upon current affairs. Clearly, political ideas
and moral ideals were essential structural features for this type of entertainment.

While superhero narratives flourished, in 1946 Gaines sold his share of the
ownership of All-American to Jack Liebowitz. Liebowitz moved promptly to merge the
company with DC into National Comics; he then consolidated this company into a larger
corporate entity called National Periodical Publications (Jones 223). Gaines then used
his proceeds to establish his own comics line: EC or Educational Comics. Titles from
this line included *Picture Stories from the Bible* and *Picture Stories from American
History* (Inge 139). When he died a year later, his son William took control of the
company and made significant changes that would impact the entire industry. Opting to
take EC in a new direction, William switched the name of the company to Entertaining
Comics. Releasing titles in the horror genre like *Tales from the Crypt* and *Weird Tales*,
William's biggest impact came with the release of Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad Magazine* in
April of 1952 (Inge 216, Reidelbach 14). Targeting an adult audience rather than a
strictly juvenile one, *Mad* included satirical parodies of television shows, advertisements,
other examples of popular culture, and events like the McCarthy hearings (Tabachnick
11). The publication's incorporation of real life issues notes a willingness on the part of
the reading public to listen to and engage dissent through a type of mediation.

In 1954, two years after *Mad*'s release, a book published by a psychiatrist named
Frederick Wertham prompted swift and significant changes in the content of mainstream comics and motivated an underground movement. Wertham's book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, argued that comics directly targeted children as an audience and pushed them toward delinquent habits by immersing them in stories about crime, sex, drugs, and other vices (Tabachnick 13). *The Seduction of the Innocent* became a rallying cry for concerned parents whose worries helped galvanize a Congressional inquiry into the comics industry itself. Rather than face the strict controls of government regulation, the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers or ACMP, opted for internal regulation and self-censorship. Though the trade group had existed since 1947, the threat posed by Wertham's attack prompted re-organization into a new entity. This group was called the Comics Magazine Association of America; it was responsible for the development of the Comics Code Authority which drew inspiration from the ACMP's original publishers code. Members would submit their titles to the CAA who would screen the work to see if it adhered to the code; if there were no violations, the work would receive the CAA's authorization to place its seal upon the comic book's cover. Some of the restrictions of the code included: “Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals,” “Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated,” and, “Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited” (Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America. 26 Oct. 1954). Though these rules were intended to preserve the moral values of youth exposed to topics presented by the genre, they also
eliminated the certification for the artistic portrayal of real events or treatment of complex issues. Such strict measures of control prohibiting the portrayal of classic monsters as well as criminal behavior reveal fears of the latent power associated with these motifs. Many contemporary graphic narratives including *The Walking Dead* capitalize upon the strength of these symbols and treat issues of morality which relate to fear from a standpoint of confrontation rather than avoidance. Long before Kirkman began writing, though, other creators laid a foundation for his success through deliberate rebellion against the CAA.

As a response, the underground or alternative comix movement began in the 1960s. Most of the titles associated with comix dealt with risqué or adult subject matter including sex, drugs, violence, radical political ideas, and/or other themes which would have been denied approval by the CAA. Flourishing in San Francisco, where the movement coincided with the growth of the burgeoning hippie counterculture, independent publishers like Rip Off Press and Kitchen Sink Press issued works that prompted thought about ideas and topics that were rarely discussed openly (Tabachnick 12). According to Dez Skinn, author of *Comix: The Underground Revolution*, the first underground comic was Frank Stack's 1964 compilation of his strip *The Adventures of Jesus* under the pseudonym Foolbert Sturgen (34). Other influential comix artists were Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, Spain Rodriguez, and Trina Roberts (Tabachnick 12). Branching out from the strict constraints of the CAA, their thoughtful works began bringing political relationships, hierarchies of power, and social standings into question.

This development changed the public's expectations of the medium and helped pave the way for the emergence of the graphic novel. It is accepted that the term
“graphic novel” was coined with Will Eisner's 1978 work, *A Contract With God* (Tabachnick 13). Yet even this origin story is somewhat inaccurate. Eisner admitted he had used the term during a phone call with the president of Bantam Publishing in New York when trying to generate interest about his new illustrated project that targeted adults rather than children; he knew the man was familiar with his earlier work on *The Spirit*, which ran from 1939 til 1952. Eisner had left his own lucrative firm in order to have the opportunity to market a narrative to an older audience through the Sunday papers. Apparently Eisner's reputation and the novelty of the phrase got him a face to face meeting and the advice to seek out a smaller publisher:

> At the time, I thought I had invented the term, but I discovered later that some guy thought about it a few years before I used the term. He had never used it successfully and had never intended it the way I did, which was to develop what I believe was viable literature in this medium. (Eisner, 20 Feb. 2002)

Eisner incorrectly refers to a number of individuals in the preceding statement. The first man Eisner wrongly discredits is Richard Kyle. Kyle first coined the term in 1964, “in the pages of the Comic Amateur Press Alliance's newsletter, *Capa-Alpha #2*” (Kaplan 14). Yet, when looking at Kyle's words in “The future of 'comics,'” it's clear he absolutely meant what Eisner claims to have thought up:

> I cannot help but feel that "comic book" and "comic book strip" are not only inappropriate and antiquated terms with which to describe these genuinely creative efforts and those of the even more fully realized productions which are bound to come, but are also terms which may easily prevent the early acceptance of the medium by the literary world. (Kyle, *Wonderworld* 2 pg.4)

Eisner also claims success for an achievement that a number of others had already accomplished two years before *A Contract With God*. In 1976 multiple texts were published that claimed to be graphic novels directly on their title pages or dust-jackets. The front flap of *Bloodstar*, created by writer Robert E. Howard and artist Richard
Corben's, reads as follows: "BLOODSTAR is a new, revolutionary concept — a graphic novel which combines all the imagination and visual power of comic strip art with the richness of the traditional novel" (Howard). Besides Bloodstar, two other texts labeled themselves as graphic novels before Eisner's project. These were Chandler: Red Tide by Joe Steranko and Beyond Time and Again by George Metzger (Williams & Lyons xiv).

Understandably, there is some confusion as to what exactly differentiates a graphic novel from a comic book. Allyson and Barry Lyga assert that the term is, “used to describe the specific format of a comic book that has greater production values and longer narrative” (162-3). Its use became widespread with the popularity of such works as Frank Miller's The Dark Knight Returns and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's Watchmen. Both of these works were published in 1986 and challenged the accepted superhero formula which had been perpetuated in graphic narratives since the Golden Age of Comics. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a graphic novel is “a full-length (esp. science fiction or fantasy) story published as a book in comic-strip format.” Often graphic novels are confused with trade paperbacks or compendiums that collect and reprint a story arc in a single edition after its previous episodic publication (Lyga & Lyga 165). These compendiums differ from graphic novels, which, according to the most precise definition, can only contain a completely self-contained story arc. This definition comes with an exception, though. As a result of colloquial indication, it's possible that graphic novels may name the often square-bound object illustrating a single story or series of related ones (ibid. 163). Metzger's Beyond Time and Again was actually a compendium, whereas Bloodstar was a long story released as a limited edition hardbound luxury item. If we believe material construction plays significant role in determining
what is or isn't a graphic novel, this distinction would name Howard and Corben as the premier creators of the literary canon's first true graphic novel. If the determining factor of what constitutes being a graphic novel is simply linked to presentation, Miller's *Dark Knight* and Moore and Gibbon's *Watchmen* are only really graphic novels if their readers are unfamiliar with origins of the narratives. However, each of these understandings of meaning are publicly recognized as accurate and accepted colloquially. In the future though, changing misconstrued ideas into certain knowledge can occur only when facts are confirmed and our future references to them continue to be correct. Otherwise, all other arguments will be inherently flawed. Hillary Chute elaborates: “In graphic narrative, the substantial length implied by novel remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction. A graphic narrative is a book-length work in the medium of comics” (453). Accounting for historically inspired or autobiographically constructed works, this definition more accurately describes works like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* or Emmanuel Guilbert's *The Photographer*, which is a graphic narrative that incorporates photographs as well as illustrations. Though the works I look at in detail within the remaining two chapters are not graphic novels according to these standards, the assembly and reprinting of multiple issues within collected volumes as well as their highly developed content make both *The Walking Dead* and *Saga of the Swamp Thing* conceivably worthy of the designation.
According to Scott McCloud, “Whenever an artist invents a new way to represent the invisible, there is always a chance that it will be picked up by other artists. If enough artists begin using the symbol, it will enter the language for good—as many have through the years” (Understanding 129). When visually constructing a story, elements of dialogue and conversation certainly classify as invisible. For example, timing and delivery are difficult to convey merely through captions especially in cases where words are spoken simultaneously. Variations in font style and size can also illustrate tone, emphasizing particular phrases to convey changes in volume or other manners of speech. As techniques like speech balloons became commonplace, it became more easy to convey narratives depicting the interplay between various characters rather than ones structured upon scenes which condensed multiple series of actions or summaries into single images.

According to Amy Kiste Nyberg, “The notion of harm is at the core of many of the ethical questions raised about the mass media, both historically and in contemporary times. In the controversy over comic books, this harm is defined at two levels. First is the harm done to individual children and critics of comic books relied on anecdotal evidence of children who modeled their own behavior after actions depicted in their comics. Second is the harm done to society, since comic books were implicated by some in the rise of juvenile delinquency in postwar America” (28).
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<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.albany.edu/view/Entry/80829 redirectedFrom=graphic+novel#eid2694448 >


Chapter II: 
Transfusion and Transference: Ideology, Art & how bleeding ink blots substitute exploding bodies in *The Walking Dead*

“If we accept the hypothesis that our popular arts mirror our culture, that they are somehow tied to our concerns and based upon widespread assumptions, then the study of our popular culture becomes an important means of understanding our society.” - Berger, *The Comic Stripped American* p. 6-7

An artwork is both a product of labor and an object with timeless qualities—its value often depends upon its age, rarity, purpose, and ability to convey the skill or reputation of the artist responsible for its creation. When determining the economic value of such a work, one also considers aesthetic values. In the case of popular art forms like comics, economic value is almost always indicative of reproducibility. Generally speaking, what's reproduced will be related to by a wide-spread audience whose support is the only guarantee of profitable success. Though comic-strips and books may have a singularly low economic value, they have been and still are purchased with great frequency. Engaging interest in an audience over an extended period of time proves that comics have remained culturally relevant. Discovering how requires an exploration of content, its presentation, and why that material appeals to an audience too.

Beyond seeing art as an object for consumption, there is a deeper subjective attraction to art since it is believed by some to possess a direct link to the soul. By this I mean to say that, at the most basic level, an object evoking aesthetic sensibility also often elicits an emotional attachment from the viewer which can be so powerful that it equates to a religious or spiritual experience. One way the significance or success of an artwork might be measured is in terms of its ability to create shared experience which promotes communal interaction and response. Partly as a result of their relatively easy reproduction, comics have acted as a perfect outlet for expressing matters of political concern. Comic strips and the longer graphic narratives they've inspired have deep roots
in expressing social critique through satire. In 1793, a four panel piece titled *John Bull’s Progress* was published by James Gillray as a precaution against Britain's advances into war (Tabachnick 8). Picturing a portly personification of the United Kingdom in the character of John Bull, we see the ravaging effects war has upon his body and family—representations who allegorical stand in for actual people. The efficacy of the work rests in its applicability. Although Gillray's audience would have called themselves subjects and those reading *The Walking Dead* today would most likely call themselves citizens, similar issues are still at stake. Even though Gillray's work directly responds to reality, Kirkman and the other creators of the contemporary graphic narrative *The Walking Dead* have drawn from their own experience to make their imaginative fantasy come to life.

*The Walking Dead* is a strange blend of mainstream and counterculture influences. Though beginning as a serially released comic, the title is now associated with an enterprise that includes a hit network television series, several video-games, and a plethora of customized merchandise. All are lucrative offshoots of the success of the story first issued in 2003 by Image Comics. *The Walking Dead* was created by author Robert Kirkman and artist Tony Moore. Moore completed the artwork for the first seven issues before being replaced by Charlie Adlard. New issues were originally, and are still, released on a monthly basis. However, several alternate compilations have been published as the series has gained popularity.

Though there is no explicit war between nations in this modern narrative, there is an imagination of what a reality in which total war existed might look like. Mainly, what is presented to the audiences of both works is a rectification of a false belief. First a state of normalcy is outlined against an expectation of what life will be like during a period of

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* Moore also continued to create the cover artwork through issue #24.
conflict or war. This expectation is then proven unreal through destructive transformations of body and lifestyle after the onset of conflict. Regardless of attempts to rebuild and restore some semblance of order, the communities which develop in The Walking Dead are impermanent; they are as doomed as any ancient empire whose once innumerable exploits have vanished and whose once impressive monuments are currently crumbling into decay. Understandably, there's a lot more separating these works than several centuries and their incredibly different content—I only hope to illustrate that complex issues affecting the average person have typically appeared in popularly purchased forms of art since printing became possible.

At the forefront of current affairs and implicit in the narrative's imagined universe is an uncertainty about bodies besides one's own. Since September 11th, 2001 the realization that an individual may forfeit his or her life to end the lives of others has been impossible to ignore. Undeniably influenced by this danger, the creative team who has produced The Walking Dead has turned every living person into a potential threat, capable of causing widespread killing at any moment. By forcing readers to reconsider how they view and interact with the human figure in this way, the creators have illustrated important concerns felt by American citizens after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, Pentagon, and United 93. Though the body is not a weapon in the comic's zombie storyline per say, the elimination of consciousness when individuals become enemies transforms their bodies into a symbolic interpretation of the ominous dangers we are facing as a society today. In an interview with GQ's Alex Pappademus, writer Robert Kirkman even states, “9/11 was definitely a big part of it, just because that was something that was on everybody's minds. It was the first time that we'd ever really
been attacked on that level, and it was definitely scary. Everybody was scared, and the future was uncertain. It was definitely on my mind.” One of the most unsettling aspects of these attacks was how vehicles requiring special knowledge to operate were transformed into missiles. Despite precautions taken to prevent accidental loss of life, these planes were re-purposed by terrorists and used to kill intentionally—even making unwilling passengers agents in the process. States of normalcy were manipulated through the concealment of identity and malevolent intentions in order to kill ordinary people with no military affiliations. The resulting devastation eliminated the ability for many who lived through it to feel completely safe or protected. Similarly, uncertainty exists and grows throughout *The Walking Dead*. To understand how faith and sanity deteriorate, I first want to examine the types of acts and conditions which cause such extreme transformations of ideals and perceptions.

Philosopher Adriana Cavarero works through a related examination of the impact of such violence in her book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. In this text, Cavarero examines the effects that witnessing extreme instances of violence and symbolic representations of these acts have upon individual subjects. She is not concerned with experiences of violence that victims or witnesses can heal from; rather she works to name a type of force which attacks the helpless and, once experienced, totally alters the identity of the individual who has undergone its effects. Even more specifically, she is concerned with tackling the emergence of a relatively new type of violence which appeared in the midst of September 11th, 2001 in the form of suicide bombers. Horrorism is restricted to defining a type of violence which operates as a result of the following circumstances: the body of is transformed into a weapon used to destroy
and dismember other bodies (Cavarero 57, 103), the victims are defenseless and randomly affected (ibid. 30-1, 76), and those who survive the aftermath are forever altered through the damage of loss which changes their subjectivity and essentially numbs them (ibid. 34, 43, 51). These conditions prompt a general reconsideration of bodily existence.

In the actual world we experience, life is incontestably punctuated by three events: conception, birth, and death. A condition in Kirkman's parallel universe is that all people transform after death unless their brains are damaged or destroyed beforehand. This robs humanity of its defining attributes: conscience and consciousness. Like the victims of horrorism Cavarero describes, the people who become zombies suffer a loss of their natural subjectivity. Understandably, characters in *The Walking Dead* have a hard time coping with such a loss of identity. The undead are rarely called “zombies.” Instead of referring to the creatures as monsters, terms which describe behavioral attributes like “walker,” “roamer,” or “lurker,” are used to distinguish them from the humans. This emphasis on naming may seem trivial but it strengthens our identification with the characters as individuals by stressing the difficulty encountered by attempting to classify the dehumanizing transformation which has changed their peers into monstrous entities. The narrative is not a simple story of the living engaged in a futile fight against the dead, but rather is a complex examination of human behavior and the fluctuation of moral values in relation to the condition of one's physical status. As societal infrastructure collapses, the maintenance of health and interpersonal relationships both become complicated.

*The Walking Dead* inhabits a strange space between the radical and conventional.
Its main narrative arc is one of survival; it is framed by the quest of protagonist, Sheriff Rick Grimes, to find his wife and seven year old son in the midst of zombie apocalypse. Though not the first to imagine a world in which human bodies are transformed into cannibalistic organisms lacking conscious awareness, the work is unique and presently relevant for a number of reasons. First, by making the protagonist an embodiment of law responsible for maintaining order and exercising authority on a personal level, the creators have poised their audience at a unique vantage point to contemplate how communities are created and maintained by individuals. Rules are enforced through attention to and adjustment of individual behaviors. Furthermore, the desire to preserve civilization even in the wake of its destruction raises questions about how we distinguish between those who belong to a particular affiliation or to a group of outsiders. The artists' representations conjure associations of religious damnation; they transform people into self-destructive agents for the eradication of their own species. Looking at the ways in which this space encompasses a reality of total war, the prevailing attitudes felt by surviving characters are skeptical and defeated. Having to acknowledge the possibility that a person could transform from an individual into an entity focused upon killing eerily echoes concerns felt by American citizens after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. In *The Walking Dead*, the creators represent the body in such a way that viewers are forced to confront their inevitable corporal decomposition and fear of vulnerability. Cavarero addresses the need to speak about these concerns and distinguish them from earlier encounters with and associations to violence:

A neologism assumes that there exists something new, different, recent. But what is so new about carnage and torture, after all? … A simple answer might be that, at first sight and in certain circumstances anyway, what is new is the way in which the massacre is now perpetrated: a body that blows itself up in order to rip other
bodies to pieces. (Cavarero 29)

Even though the zombies in Kirkman's work don't blow themselves up, or even consciously choose to attack the living bodies around them, they are bodies which literally rip other bodies to pieces. Suicide bombers are also unsuspected. Similarly, there is no way of telling who might become a zombie. Beyond that though, they call up associations of other disturbing images of disfigurement and panic. Relating to these metamorphosed bodies is impossible though. Instead we must turn to the actions of surviving characters, who are only a breath away from losing their consciousness as well. Through this connection, viewers are prompted to acknowledge that morality and identity are inseparably linked to circumstance.

My interest in the narrative stems from a curiosity regarding how the fantasies of violence it depicts are related to a fear of the military-industrial complex and over-dependence upon federally consolidated power. The social critique embedded in The Walking Dead is an unsettling portrayal of the illusion of safety. The various government agencies and other institutions of the world supported through elections, wealth, and power were made up of individuals just as vulnerable to the epidemic and ensuing crisis as those who were part of an anxious poor and middle class. Stressing the existence of an unrealized search for intervention among surviving characters reveals a population unaccustomed to confronting violence firsthand. Tracing the ways these characters must use the force of violence themselves and react toward it after living through a world unarguably permeated by its existence is an interesting exercise in exploring the composition of the American psyche. Such considerations can be useful in determining whether identity is at all stable or entirely alterable based upon changing situations. This raises questions about the sanctity of law and other social contracts. Moreover, this
graphic narrative posits that the disappearance of state apparatuses we depend upon to maintain order and normalcy is possible. The work imagines how people would react to a mass pandemic and shows those who've hoped upon government intervention either perishing or being forced to adapt and develop a greater sense of self-sufficiency.

Since the series is currently nearing the release of its 113th issue, I've decided to reference the first compendium version released in 2009 for reasons of accessibility. This particular publication collects the first forty-eight issues of the series, although it does not have any of the original cover art. It spans over a thousand pages which are not numbered, so any image discussed is reproduced in the appendix at the end of this chapter. The compendium is divided into eight chapters which are the summation of six monthly issues each; they are labeled with three word titles which are taken from earlier trade paperback releases.

The differentiation between the universes contained in The Walking Dead and lived actuality make the concepts of bodily transformation and communal reconsideration interesting and manageable. Coping with mortality and loss is mitigated first and foremost through the gap between physical space and conceived space where the story occurs. Physical space is formed by grids of panels that make up each page of the text, whereas conceived space is the environment as perceived by the characters. This type of relationship engages the reader. According to Scott McCloud, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (Understanding 67). Prompting readers to absorb visual information through pictures, the creators have implicated readers in bringing the events of the narrative to life
thus creating an affective response.

The ability to see these changes hinges upon strong character development. As the import of ethics can only be measured by actions, the decision to craft the narrative arc around protagonist Rick Grimes is incredibly significant. As the story develops, multiple plots emerge; however, Rick's perspective remains paramount. In an interview given on May 19th, 2008 for the online publication *Comic Book Resources* the author revealed, “Rick Grimes is arguably the main character...He's the only character who's been in every issue so far...and he's the only character we've really focused on at all times” (Kirkman). Because Rick's presence is so important, I will be tracing his development and overlooking some of the parallel plot lines involving other characters. Moreover, Rick's anchoring presence allows readers to measure how repeated exposure to violence and use of the force alter his sense of self and role within the community.¹

The first chapter of the work, “Days Gone Bye,” foreshadows change and indicates nostalgic longing for a bygone era. Beginning in the midst of a shootout, the foreground of the first panel shows Rick and partner Shane taking cover behind a squad car with guns drawn (Figure 1). In the background is a battered pick-up from where the assailing fire has originated. Above the pickup an onomatopoetic clue indicates the blast of a shotgun: “BOOM!” The two o's intersect as a Venn Diagram might; this visual clue prompts readers to consider how two seemingly separate things share common properties. About a quarter of the size of this word and extending the line which forms the cruiser's hood stands, “SPAK!” We are shown an immediacy of danger as surrounding motion lines depict the discharged bullet pinging of the cruiser's hood close to Rick's head.

Apart from these words, other visual clues evoke multiple aspects of sensory
information. For example, the four circles above the squad car's sirens mimic sonic information and the sense of alarm. These circles transform in each of the following panels where they appear and can also be read as symbols of the ways violence effects those exposed to it. When they appear in the first panel, they vary in size—the two in the center are larger than those at the edges and intersect one another. Following close ups of Rick, Shane, and the gunman (Figure 2), similar circles appear in another arrangement, thus suggesting their relationship to expressing violent encounters. In this fifth panel Rick is shown trying to gain a position from where he can take out the assailant (Figure 3). With his back to the scene, Rick faces forward toward the reader. Another “BOOM!” sits above the pickup indicating a second shot has been fired. Shane has also moved and the small circle that was above him in the first panel has followed. Now it barely resembles a semi-circle, but its shape is implied by the continuation of line formed by his gun as it flies up from his hand. This semi-circle opens up into the larger circle in the center. It is paired with a notation indicating that Shane has been disarmed: “PING!” The letters of this word are about the same size as “SPAK” in the first panel, downplaying the gravity of the shot's impact. Readers would process much of this information unconsciously; this is a way to think about how content works to generate affect. As a result of the contact, Rick is practically defenseless. Now that Rick has moved away from the cover of the cruiser, the placement of the circles nearby takes on new meaning. The other two circles that appear have been altered as well. The largest in the center now intersects with the second small circle nearest to the gunman. This last circle opens up to the surrounding space.

The final panel on the first page has no border and significantly bleeds into the
margins. Unlike the four halved panels in the grid's center, it is the same size as the first (Figure 4). Marking the climax of the confrontation, it shows the criminal's success as a bullet rips through Rick while his back is turned toward us. By showing Rick facing the gunman when he is shot, the artist calls up associations of bravery, honor, and valor. Rick is facing down danger, so the audience doesn't perceive him as a coward. As the narrative progresses and Rick's enemies become undead rather than unlawful, this sense of righteousness is maintained. Regardless of this moral stance, though, Rick is no less vulnerable or protected from harm. This scenario also emphasizes the separation between actuality and possible worlds by highlighting our inability to alter what is happening within the world we are shown.

The line which would complete Rick's torso near his right shoulder is absent. A tiny black arrow indicates the black spots representing torn pieces of his flesh are being pushed out of his body by the trajectory of the bullet. This deliberately implicates the reader as an agent responsible for interpreting the impact of violence; the symbol requires an acknowledgment of the ways in which the hostile force extends outwardly and affects individuals beyond those directly targeted. This detail secures an authorial awareness of audience with specific attention to violence and is critical to my reading of the narrative in its entirety.

In this panel the four lightly drawn circles above the squad car appear again; and they've been affected as well. At first the only circles that intersect are the two large ones above the officers with an obvious connection. Yet as the confrontation escalates and the gunman's bullets reach his intended targets, new connections and gaps begin to appear. In the last panel, only the small circle farthest right and closest to the gunman is
complete. To its left are the two bigger circles intersecting like links of a chain. The small circle rightmost on the page has been cut off and appears only in part. Because violence not only affects perpetrators and victims but their families as well, the fourth circle could be said to represent this spillover. If this reading seems dubious, it's possible that shape represents an opening of closed communities by marking the opening of integral bodies; Rick's body, for example, dually signifies his own existence as well as that of law. Since the leftmost circle does not intersect any others in the opening panel, but is present in the second to last and final ones, it could depict how the location has been changed as a result of the standoff and spilled blood. Not only would this type of reading suggest that the violent event alters the space itself, but also those connected to it. So the earlier speculation that the shape may represent those connected, but not present during the event, also experiencing transformation as a result of its occurrence still holds weight.

Furthermore, this impact extends to readers. In *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*, James Elkins argues that “drawings are a place to observe the exchange between seeing and blindness and to mediate on the ways that blindness threads its way through vision” (235). Accordingly the contemplation of an artwork can give viewers the chance to identify discontinuity in form and then translate that into a tool for finding it in other areas of life. Earlier, Elkins argues that sight is not objective but instead is influenced by an observer's location in his or her environment (*Object* 12). The blindness he hints at is an obstruction created by particular experiential subjectivity that causes individuals to be attached to some objects or sentiments while completely missing others. Rather than referencing discovery as an action completely attributable to the viewer, he
implicates the role of one's surroundings as key to enabling one to make a discovery. From this perspective, looking is not only an active determination but a continually unfolding process that reshapes the viewer who has become more or less aware of the world he or she inhabits (Elkins, *Object* 35). Thus the result of seeing a particular object or image is not an immediate event with a distinguishable ending. Elkins describes this as an acidic affect: “An image is not a piece of data in an information system. It is a corrosive, something that has the potential to tunnel into me, to melt part of what I am and re-form it in another shape” (*Object* 42). Though each image works with the others to develop the narrative, a reader's gaze may linger on one illustration longer than on another.

The full page portrait, following the panel depicting Rick's injury promotes this momentary pause because of its size (Figure 5). Though the shooting scene before emphasizes the existence of violence, it is not an instance of horrorism. Rather, it puts Rick into the position from which he will have to face that particular type of violence. In defining horrorism, a necessary condition is that victims are defenseless. During the standoff, he was armed and had his partner as an ally. Clearly he is not defenseless here, only bested. Now that we see Rick alone in the hospital it is obvious circumstances have changed. Rick is shown lying in bed while hooked to an IV. The outlined speech balloon indicating his gasp portrays a moment of awakening; presumably the first time he has regained consciousness since being shot. The next page is laid out in a nine panel grid that emphasizes Rick's weakness as he attempts to stand, falls, and cries out vainly for a nurse (Figure 6). As he moves through the hospital, the situation seems to become more helpless. While searching for another living person, he only encounters reanimated
corpses. There are seventy-six panels between the page where Rick wakes up and the first time he encounters other living people. When this happens, he's greeted by violence: he's hit on the back of a head with a shovel by a child named Duane Jones. Duane's father Morgan supplies Rick with the first information he has about the current state of affairs. He propels the narrative forward by telling Rick how the media advocated for relocation to cities after the outbreak. This moment is humanizing. It revives Rick's hope for finding his missing wife and son, who he believes set out for Atlanta to stay with her parents. At this point in time, the audience has already been able to find familiarity through the story's setting and also in the development of empathy for Rick, who has been characterized as a worthy family man willing to sacrifice his own safety to protect others.

Rick then takes his new-found friends to the Cynthia police station where he begins to stock up for his trip. Despite nearly being killed by walkers when escaping the hospital, Rick is incredibly trusting. Cavarero accounts for such confidence among victims in scenarios of horrorism by saying, “the human condition of vulnerability entails a constitutive relation to the other: an exposure to wounding but also the care that the other can supply” (38). In certain ways, Rick is indebted to Morgan and Duane. However, his decision to aid them both while preparing himself comes naturally and does not seem forced. While fulfilling a moral obligation by providing them with supplies, he is also attempting to give them a better chance at survival rather than just repaying them for saving his life. We are shown supporting evidence of his concern for others as he generously shares weapons and a vehicle with Morgan. Moreover, Rick's response to Morgan's admittance of the perceived immorality of occupying his neighbor’s home
demonstrates that he is practical and just. Rick comes across as intelligent. He adapts to his circumstances and does not merely abide by the letter of the law without thought: “I'm not going to arrest you if that's what you mean...You don't have to justify anything to me. You're keeping your son safe. I'm worried sick about mine. I understand.” Even in this possible world categorized by death, familial ties take precedence. Concern for the safety of his loved ones becomes the motivating factor for survival, an attribute which is respected by readers. This identification is crucial in order for narrative to achieve the function of prompting readers to pose questions about how scenarios of isolation, epidemic, and violence relate to their own experience.

Skipping ahead, Rick is reunited with his wife, son, and former partner Shane just outside of Atlanta (Figure 7). They've been camping near the city's border awaiting government or military rescue. Despite the magnitude of danger they've witnessed and failure of these institutions, there still seems to be a consensus that this situation is temporary. Including Rick, the group has fifteen members; four are children. Rick's son, Carl, is only seven. Ensuring the safety of these children is paramount and one of the primary reasons why the adults are pulling for the arrival of organized aid. Besides lacking the supplies and weaponry they need to be entirely self-sufficient, the group's peril is exacerbated by the fact that many of its members are not only unaccustomed to defending themselves but physically unable to. Especially for the group's youth, the danger of encountering a walker is life-threatening. When viewing the violence of this text through the lens of horrorism, the status the children have as defenseless beings is crucial: “This means that, as a creature totally consigned to a relationship, a child is the vulnerable being par excellence and constitutes the primary paradigm of any discourse on
vulnerability” (Cavarero 30). Totally dependent upon their caregivers, the children have neither the stature nor strength to contend with lethal threats like those posed by the creatures who would stop at nothing to kill and consume them. Violating the sanctity of innocence by compromising the well-being of a child is one of the most heinous and unforgivable acts one can commit. Accordingly, to understand the impact the enactment of violence has upon a community as well as the individual(s) directly subjected to it, one must compare its actual effects to the expectations held by those affected before they have undergone that trauma. To illustrate the severity of consequences which would be caused by this type of inescapable violence, the creators of *The Walking Dead* invert and shatter the social roles and responsibilities normally associated with juvenile characters—namely, by withdrawing their ability to remain sheltered from death.

Among the companions, the make-shift community has become considerably comfortable. Though they are without the luxuries of running water or electricity, they are close enough to the city for one of their members, Glenn, to make routine supply runs for food and amenities like detergent. This setting lulls many into a false sense of security, especially once Rick and Glenn obtain guns and begin giving shooting lessons. Though Rick advocates for relocation, Shane refuses and resists considering the possibility (Figure 8 & 9). Unbeknownst to Rick, when he was left behind at the hospital in Kentucky, Shane and Lori slept together. Shane's desire to maintain a sense of authority and avoid being replaced by Rick has cataclysmic effects upon the group. The interruption to Shane's fantasy for supplanting Rick as his wife's lover and son's father figure forces the other survivors into peril. One night the camp is attacked and two members perish in the fray; one of the victims is a college aged young woman named
Amy (Figure 10 & 11). This becomes a breaking point for Shane who punches Rick square in his jaw while a majority of the group, including Carl, watches the next morning (Figure 12 & 13). When Rick follows Shane into the woods, things take a turn for the worst. Lori falls to her knees as Rick runs after Shane. A four panel grid which takes up almost the whole width of the page reveals her painful acquiescence to fate. As others crowd around her to offer support, Carl is shown watching his father run off and subsequently chases after him. In the second to last panel where we see Carl mid-sprint, Lori hangs her head at her upturned palms and says: “It's never going to be the same again. We're never going to be normal...” The last panel shows her looking up as tears stream down her cheeks toward her pouted lips: “Just look at us” (Figure 14). Artistry leads us to identify strongly with Rick's wife in this moment. Lori's expression is strikingly similar to the universally recognized expression of sadness, which is just one of six identified by Paul Ekman (McCloud, *Making 83*). Changes in her head position and gaze also amplify the emotional connection to the reader. Her plea to the group members dually reminds readers of how powerful the medium and story they are engaging are; both will have a direct impact upon their future perceptions.

Transitioning next to the action unfolding between Rick and Shane, we see Rick attempt to stop his partner and reason with him (Figure 15). Shane then aims the barrel of his shotgun squarely at Rick's chest and begins to scream emotionally (Figure 16). This moment seems to harken back to the shootout between Rick, Shane, and the unnamed criminal where the narrative began. Though the gun-wielding madman is different, Rick is again facing the situation with his back to the reader as he had been in the opening shootout. Whereas Rick seems to have returned to his original positioning,
Shane has adopted many of the traits of the deadly criminal in that opening scene, including his grimace. His intense expression looks like a hybrid combination between disgust and anger. In this grid, both characters appear in the same number of panels and in balanced positions. These moment to moment transitions amplify the tension of the explosive situation. With the gun pointed to his chest, the palms of Rick's hands face out toward the barrel. His vulnerability is highlighted by this stance of surrender. A smear of blood runs from Rick's right nostril, further emphasizing the situation's dynamic. The close-up shot alternates from Rick back to Shane, whose recorded dialogue even bears an eerie resemblance to the crazed gunman from the opening panels. The speech balloons coming from his turned down mouth are distorted as well: one opens up into the gutter and the other is formed from jagged lines rather than being rounded. The design technique of opening up Shane's words into the space of the margin interrupts closure that readers would make distinguishing actions between panels. Alternately, trading smooth balloons for ones with sharp, pointed edges conveys a tone of anger. His tirade continues on the next page in a panel spanning its width: “I'VE GOT NOTHING, RICK!! NO FRIENDS!! NO FAMILY!! NO RESPECT!! NO FUCKING LIFE!! THIS FUCKING WORLD! THIS FUCKING GOD-FORSAKEN WORLD OF SHIT! THERE'S NOTHING FOR ME HERE RICK!! NOTHING!” The speech balloons containing this text are also altered in a similarly fashion to those in the preceding panel. As tears fall from his eyes, we see Shane indirectly admit his feelings for Lori. His grief doubles Lori's but is imbued with anger; it conveys a desperation which readers cannot help but feel somewhat sympathetic toward. Although readers may sympathize slightly with Shane, the overwhelming affect produced by this situation is one of a fear for Rick's well-
being who has done nothing to deserve this. Shane places the blame on Rick for his loss of stability and the chance to have love. Graphically, this scene accentuates the internal turmoil of the moment through the absence of backgrounds in the close-up shots which juxtapose Shane and his unarmed target. Four of the six panels on this particular page have plain white backgrounds and use negative space to focus the attention of the readers upon dialogue.³

On the following page, Shane cocks his shotgun and turns it toward Rick, ready to fire. Of the five panels which appear on this page, the first, fourth, and fifth occupy its entire width. The second and third are completely devoid of drawn backgrounds; the former illustrates Shane aiming his gun at Rick with a descriptive speech balloon that opens up into the gutter once more, while the latter illustrates Rick raising his hand in surrender. Both men are positioned at the center of the page. Putting each man side by side emphasizes the immediacy of the scenario and oddly seems to place the two in an equal stance. The fourth panel, which is longer than these two, confirms this equality as it depicts Shane's wincing face as a bullet tears through his neck (Figure 17). This image directly parallels the moment when the camp was overrun by zombies and Amy was unexpectedly bitten in the neck (Figure 10). The bullet tears through Shane's neck as the creature's teeth ripped through hers. Black ink representing blood appears to squirt toward the right of the panel, indicating the velocity of the bullet. Extending the trajectory of the bullet into the realm of moral or ethical metaphor, it could be argued that killing Shane is a step in the right direction. Behind Shane, “BLAM!” spans across the background. The letters are so large there is only a half millimeter gap between their edges and the panel's border in certain spots. Shane's head stands in for the “A,”
occupying the space where the letter should be located. Apart from this verbal replacement for the crack of gunfire, the spatter of blood, and five, half inch long, motion lines depicting the movement of Shane's head, the background is plain. Below this panel is one of equal size depicting the shooter (Figure 18). Carl is positioned at the leftmost side of the panel. At its center, his hands are clasped around a small firearm that is emanating a wisp of white smoke. His face resembles Shane's just before he attempted to shoot Rick. It seems as though a mentality has been transferred here. From his turned down mouth a jagged speech balloon that breaks the top border reads, “DON'T HURT MY DADDY AGAIN!” Clearly, witnessing the violent incident when Shane punched his father earlier had an effect on Carl. The notion of transference is supported by other visual clues which echo Shane's previous combative actions. For example, Carl's speech bubble also breaks the upper panel border and opens up into the gutter just as Shane's had before. Also, the placement of his gun extends farther than Shane's head; this could signify that since Carl has now committed an act of violence he is liable to commit others.

On the next page, seven panels depict the passing of time as Shane clutches the wound on his neck, Carl runs into his father's arms, and Shane collapses before them. In this sequence of events, the stylistic repetition of virtually blank backgrounds characterizes the three close-up shots. It also emphasizes that death is not immediate. Further reinforcing that this act has ethical implications, father and son crouch on the right side of the fourth and fifth panels while Shane's lifeless body falls flatly on the ground to the left. Even his head and hat are turned leftwards. Strangely, his arms open outward in a position reminiscent of Jesus when nailed to the cross; despite Shane's
transgressions, this image calls up associations of martyrdom (Figure 20). As Rick holds his son in the last two panels, the two attempt to cope with what has just happened (Figure 19 & 20). Carl lifts his head from his father’s chest and says, “It's not the same as killing the dead ones, Daddy.” Here his speech again opens up into the gutter. This is fitting since the events defy simply comprehension. Shane had been transformed from a protector into a source of danger. This dynamic is similar to what occurs when individuals are transformed into zombies. Not only seeing this change, but having to step in and stop Shane from killing his father firsthand is enough to make Carl jaded and distrusting. Appropriately, the moment of Carl's expression closes the grid.

What follows is a full page dedicated to a single image of the two who have survived the conflict which closes the chapter. Here the landscape is drawn in vivid detail (Figure 20). Still kneeling, Rick embraces Carl at the center of the page. In front of them lays Shane's awkwardly outstretched lifeless body. Shane's left arm is bent at the elbow, his right arm points straight out, and his feet point into the ground as a pool of blood collects under his head which is shown in profile. Two speech balloons signify Rick's response, “It never should be, son. It never should be.” The strong contrast between depicting such a painful and violent scene in such a beautifully constructed landscape causes readers to consider death as a natural, organic process. This depiction could also be seen as strongly tied to Rick's perspective. Nearly having died, this shot could signify a feeling of renewed appreciation for life on his part. Since so much of the natural surroundings are shown while Rick is also holding his child close, this moment layers the pain of loss with thankfulness for survival. In his book Ledbetter claims, “Find out who is doing the hurting and who is being hurt, and at this point narrative reveals an
ethic” (13). As this series of events reveals though, violence is often not the manifestation of simple battles between good and evil. The graphic dimensions of this episode can help underscore problems of clear distinction between the two extremes. The boundary between the two states of being is not static but bent to fit a particular perspective. Since Shane had been an officer of the law and friend of the Grimes family, his belief that ousting Rick would somehow improve his position is flawed and appears to be motivated by extreme loss. Of course Carl has been damaged by the ordeal, but Rick has experienced a violation of trust and is affected as well. Once an ally, Shane became an enemy after traumatic experience; this suggests his transformation isn't essentially different from the change experienced by those who become zombies. In this respect, Rick's claim that killing in this case is different is somewhat contradictory. This puts readers into a space of tension with the comic book's possible world. Even though killing Shane was a justifiable act of defense, it definitely was not an act Carl had wanted to commit. Here readers are prompted to empathize with Rick and Carl. Despite being aware of why shooting Shane was absolutely necessary, readers can also understand why losing him is more emotional and painful.

Accordingly, bearing witness to this violence has lasting implications for all those involved, including the readers. Cavarero asserts that all spectators are affected by such an experience. She states, “To be spectators, by means of images, of the pain of others does not signify that their suffering is not endured materially” (Cavarero 55). Though she is referring to photographic images, if we consider this statement in the context of Lewis' theory of possible worlds it still rings true. The reason why we can relate to the characters in this story is because they do suffer and endure the events depicted.
Returning to the full page image which closes the first chapter, the emphasis upon nature reinforces that struggle is an unavoidable part of existence. Nearly all of the readers interacting with the series have experienced betrayal or loss, even if not to the extent the characters portrayed have. Moreover, pairing the intensity of such emotion within a scenic setting makes the content of the text feel more accessible and easier to empathize with. Similarly, Ledbetter claims that “Story-telling allows me to play with as many personal selves as I can possible tell stories about in order to discover my own identity” (5). Different characters can act as embodiments for particular aspects of our personalities or behavioral patterns. Conversely, they can also serve as models for traits or archetypes which we might never hope to emulate but can imagine nonetheless. Their containment inside a fictional context makes this type of contemplation conceivable, though. If the characters were written and drawn to demonstrate they possessed the belief that their world was fabricated, *The Walking Dead* would be an entirely different story. According to Lewis, “If we want the theoretical benefits that the talk of *possibilia* brings, the most straightforward way to gain honest title to them is to accept such talk as the literal truth” (4). Some off the benefits of engaging this particular possible world are: developing a better understanding of what causes violence, honing the ability to differentiate between different kinds of violence, figuring out how violence effects those exposed straightaway and in the long-run, and potentially finding alternate solutions to using violence as a means to achieve an end. Such considerations can be empowering for an individual. They can promote psychological change and alter the way an individual perceives him or herself in relation to society. But as the narrative reveals, these distinctions are often subject to change and difficult to uphold. Becoming aware of their
fragility can influence interpersonal interactions. They can also affect how individuals perceive their relationship to the environment they inhabit. On a larger scale, if multiple individuals come to the same conclusions about a particular idea, or recognize patterns in the appearance or dissipation of violence, they can take constructive action which will be world altering.

_The Walking Dead_ is more of a cautionary tale than a straightforward consciousness raising exercise, though. As Elkins posits, “Pictures of the body elicit thoughts about the body, and they can also provoke physical reactions in my body” (Object 138). Thus the simple act of viewing an image can manifest doubly in both body and mind. When we encounter an unthinkable event, like one where a child is forced to kill to protect his parent, it's impossible not to interrogate the conditions that have made the event a reality. Undoubtedly, changes to the anticipated time-line of bodily existence partially account for this state of affairs. In the actual world we inhabit as readers, life is incontestably punctuated by three events: conception, birth, and death. Human existence has become complicated within the fictional universe of _The Walking Dead_ though. Another two events have been added to the expected trajectory of the body: reanimation and cerebral annihilation. These states are devoid of the consciousness which characterizes the others. Even though these bodily transformations are mediated through fiction, they prompt emotional and physical reactions from readers. Seeing such horror manifest within the work via illustration as well as narrative pushes readers to adopt and challenge the view points of the characters who are confronted by it. According to Arthur Asa Berger, “On the visual level alone the grotesque is significant. Its ugliness is an affront to society and suggests that something is wrong with the social
order” (200). The premise for constant exposure to the grotesque in this case is an inability to escape decomposing corpses with a ceaseless compunction to consume the living. Understandably, there is an inherent social commentary in this pervasive condition.

As we learn in chapter three, “Safety Behind Bars,” no one is exempt from this transformation. Regardless of cause of death, any and all individuals will reanimate unless their brains have been destroyed. Therefore coping with the loss of a loved one can be even more difficult than it would be normally because expiration must be repeated. By complicating the expected trajectory of the body, Kirkman has also transformed it into something wholly different from previous associations of it as representative of an individual and organism. This is true for the characters within The Walking Dead like Shane, whose existence was written before this condition existed. Accordingly, readers cope with this inversion of normalcy in the same time as characters like Rick for example. The metamorphosis makes the body into a morbid agent of perpetual destruction. Rather than being categorized by personality or behavior, the transformation following death erases all earlier sense of identity. Distinction between bodies of these walkers is only possible through the recognition or differentiation of physical features. Cavarero categorizes a similar type of violent transformation: “Horror has to do precisely with the killing of uniqueness, in other words it consists in an attack on the ontological material that, transforming unique beings into a mass of superfluous beings whose murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat” (43). This means no trace of former relationships remains known to the transformed bodies which were once familiar to the living. Once metamorphosed, all bodies simply become a threat. Though
killing is practically a necessary condition of survival in this possible world, it can still cause internal conflict. Even if characters have accepted this precondition, they might have done so with ambivalence or even guilt. Nevertheless, their attitudes toward killing are reshaped.

We see Rick coping with this inversion of normalcy later on in the chapter. After Shane's death, the group first took residence in a gated community called Wiltshire Estates and later on the farm owned by Hershel Greene. Both of these locations were overrun by “herds,” or large masses of walkers that act with a mob mentality. Referring to beings which were once human as one might a pack of wild animals, the creators have forced readers to reconsider what distinguishes their existence from that of any other creature. After suffering casualties in both places and being forced from these locations, Rick and his group clear out and occupy an abandoned prison. Once they gain access to the compound's interior, they find four prisoners who've been locked inside the cafeteria. Despite having come across other survivors, Rick and his group are immediately distrusting of these criminals. Their past convictions still inform their current status. Kirkman and Tony Moore emphasize this by having each criminal identify himself by naming the crime he has been incarcerated for (Figure 21). Tension is emphasized here by an abundance of facial shots. This also helps readers to pair dialogue with emotion, thus easing the absorption of content in largely word specific scenes. Heavy shadows make the convicts seem all the more imposing. First, we see a grizzled inmate with long white hair and beard state his crime: “Armed robbery.” Next there's a reverse angle shot of a balding man wearing glasses from profile: “Tax Fraud—But it wasn't my fault.” Below this panel stands a windy explanation from a bug-eyed ex-addict: “Drugs, man—
possession, selling, stealing... I've done it all. But I'm clean now—totally clean...Gotta be, y'know...” Finally, beside him is an extreme close-up of a massive face shaded heavily on the left side: “Murder.” The names of these inmates in order of appearance are: Axel, Thomas, Andrew, and Dexter. Ironically, the only character to deny culpability is the individual who will cause the most carnage. Whereas Thomas denies his crime, Dexter admits to homicide and also admits the details. In a crime of passion, he killed his adulterous wife and her lover. Although the threat Thomas poses is unknown at the time, the members of the group have already formed strong opinions of Dexter. Lori is among the most outspoken (Figure 22). Though her fears are not illogical, her own infidelity may motivate her extreme antagonism toward Dexter especially because she cannot be certain whether the baby she's pregnant with is Rick's or Shane's.

Misconceptions and incorrect judgments of character have severe consequences in this possible world, though. Since Kirkman is interrogating the hierarchical divisions established by social order, it's important for him to test the pertinence of archetypes and stereotypes in the face of civilization's supposed destruction. Placing an advocate of the law against those who have previously defied it provides the context from which to test the efficacy of established authority. Moreover, Rick's need to act in accordance with his own moral code creates an absence of authoritative vigilance at the prison. In this chapter readers are exposed to the inconsistencies of the actions of individuals when they are compared against their supposed ethical codes. Even though organized infrastructure has vanished, memories of its existence are still very real for surviving characters. Though state power has disappeared, there is still a fantasy of its existence which helps
explain the group's reliance upon Rick and disdain for the new-found occupants of their shelter. Yet even among these convicted criminals there is not a clear consensus or articulation of what exactly the correct moral code is or what it means to violate it. What Kirkman draws attention to through the interaction of these various characters is that despite the belief in the existence of law, the law itself is only maintained by the willingness of individuals to adhere to it. Moreover, since actions like Shane's murder attempt can be justified as being in accordance to one's own moral code while still defying the determinations of law, the work shows that the stability of societal infrastructure is merely a construct subject to deterioration. In fact, the pursuit of upholding individual ideals often comes at the expense of the group's well-being.

Without informing any of the group's members he is leaving, Rick sets out to determine whether or not Shane has transformed into a walker. Having been shot in the neck and buried before the group realized one need not be bitten or scratched by a walker to turn into such a creature, this metamorphosis is almost certain. Rick feels an obligation to make sure, though. Alternating between depictions of four of the group's most able members attempting to clear out the prison's overrun gym and Rick's solitary journey, Kirkman and Tony Moore demonstrate how fragile the community actually is. The four clearing out the gym, Tyreese, Glenn, Arnold, and Andrea, are outnumbered. Tyreese runs into a large congregation of the walkers and breaks formation (Figure 23 & 24). Next a grid is devoted to Rick's reflection as he watches Shane rise up from the grave he's just shoveled out (Figure 25 & 26). As Shane's corpse grunts unintelligibly Rick replies: “Had things turned out differently, if you had killed me...I wonder if you would have just assumed being buried 'alive' wouldn't effect me. Could you have lived
with yourself? Not me. I had to set things right” (Figure 27-29). After we see Rick accomplish this, the action flashes back to the prison. The focus is now on Hershel Greene who is searching the dark corridors of the prison for his two youngest daughters, Rachel and Susie (Figure 30). A full grid is dedicated to showing his unanswered calls and shouts (Figure 31 & 32). Constructing a tone of panicked desperation, Tony Moore shows us an enactment of the unthinkable or an example of pure horrorism. With Rick absent, metaphorically law is absent as well and turmoil and chaos reign.

The first panel depicts Hershel witnessing its aftermath; his two twin girls have been decapitated in the prison's barber shop (Figure 33). Though readers see the images of Hershel's tear-filled eyes and the horrifically mutilated bodies of his daughters simultaneously, the choice to indicate his sight as the means for discovery is important. Firstly, it draws a tether between reality and vision. Even though Susie and Rachel were murdered before their father found out, the echoing impact of this heinous crime is only complete once its occurrence is known. Secondly, by implicating sight as an act within the process of violence, our own security as readers is challenged. Cavarero argues that our detachment from the image doesn't separate us from its affect. From this viewpoint voyeurism “not only fails to cancel out reality; it does not prevent reality from challenging us, making us responsible” (Cavarero 55). In a work composed of images that contains hundreds of representations of distorted bodies, this large panel is particularly upsetting. It is more meaningful than the gruesome depictions of random walkers because it is emotionally charged; there is a history between the viewer, the victims, and their father who bears witness. I envision this connection as a cross-dimensional pyramid-like projection: Hershel, Rachel, and Susie occupy points on the
flat base of the pyramid and are connected only to one another while the viewer can see each from its tip. Since the knees of the girls point away from one another and Hershel is positioned kneeling between them, they seem to fill the space triangularly. Looking for shapes among these figures is a way to think about how structure forms content. According to Elkins:

A picture of the body is the site of a series of decisions (many of them made 'in advance' or unconsciously) regarding what is presentable: what will stand for the body in any given instance. And for that reason, both the final and initial question for any image of the body is: What is representable? (Pictures 277)

Moore renders the pain of the loss of innocence in such a way that we cannot avoid an empathetic viewing. Layered in his depictions are the dual levels of physical and emotional suffering. On the level of the body, he shows a visceral aperture that calls anatomy to mind. On the level of the purely internal, he uses the frame of a black background and Hershel's body language to emphasize the viewer's connection to the pain and torment he undeniably feels. At this moment in time, only Hershel and the murderer know the extent of what has occurred. Like the other group members, Rick is unaware this terrible act has happened.

This moment is an odd juncture in the text because the audience has been afforded more knowledge than the story's protagonist. As Ledbetter expresses, though, such moments can be pivotal points packed with meaning which possess the true essence of a work's import. He writes, “a moment in the story that seems to go against the flow of the text, may be the moment of ethical discovery” (2). Since readers are guided by Rick's presence through a majority of the narrative, his brief absence is significant. More precisely, the only opportunity for such a gruesome and horrible act to be perpetrated without interference was when the embodied representation of law disappeared from the
immediate proximity of the group. As a result, we as readers must question the stability of that community and the strength of its ethical codes. The first step in approaching questions regarding the import of ethical codes which influence community structure is a documented challenge to their existence. Exposing the community and readers to an atrocious and unspeakable act, this sequence defies the ideal that the only desire people have in this apocalyptic possible world is to survive. Instead, this double murder shows that there are still individuals who will choose to enact their own sick fantasies of power by making innocent people suffer; or, in other words, that evil still exists. Since human existence is on the verge of extinction, this exploration of malevolence addresses issues of human nature. Before Rick's return, though, the stakes become increasingly elevated. More specifically, this examination becomes an inquiry into ethics. Since Rick finds out after the rest of the community, the immediate response of its other members becomes telling. There is a level of culpability attributable to Rick since, as a leader, he pushed Hershel to bring his family to the prison in the first place. However, because he is not present during this moment of crisis a great deal more attention is paid to the other characters who make up the group's ranks.

The rippling effect of violence slowly moves out and touches the other members of the community. Maggie, Hershel's eldest and now sole surviving daughter, sees the scene next. The immorality of the prisoners is further typified as Axel spies on Lori and Carol in the shower. Shortly after Glenn, Arnold, and Andrea return to the courtyard to tell the others they believe Tyreese has perished in the gym. This is a huge blow for the group but is exponentially surpassed by the news of the girls' murder. Lori furiously accuses Dexter of the murder and locks him inside a cell (Figure 34-36). By not being
present to witness this immediate reaction, Rick's absence has allowed tension to escalate and the remaining semblance of legal fabric to deteriorate further toward mob rule. All the while Thomas Richards is escaping detection by allowing the emotional passions of the group to mask his guilt. When Rick returns he is given the consolation of finding Tyreese alive, but he and the others in the prison are still panicked. No testimony other than suspicion connects Dexter to the crime; so there is no promise there won't be another killing. Though Rick has no evidence Dexter is responsible, he threatens physical force if proof can be found (Figure 37). Rick's challenge and confrontational exterior hide an intense emotional pain and sentiment of failure (Figure 38). He blames himself for the death of Hershel's daughters because he assured their safety and was not present to offer protection when they were attacked. Dexter remains suspect until Thomas attempts to repeat his crime.

Turning again to the theories of Mark Ledbetter, moments of physical injury or harm which come to characters can represent points of cognitive importance for readers; body metaphor familiarizes readers with the text (12) and makes character experience more personal and easier to internalize in relation to political experience (15). When Thomas attempts to repeat his crime with Andrea, he targets her while she is isolated from the rest of the group. Moreover, he physically injures her before she is able to seek out help, slicing off her left earlobe and scarring that side of her face. As this attack leaves Andrea scarred, it also has the same effect upon readers. In seeking out the ethic of a text, Ledbetter notes identifying instances like these as an essential exercise because “these characters' bodies serve as microcosm to the larger 'body' of text—the narrative we are reading—and to the language of body metaphor which is so much a part of the human
experience, or the human narrative” (18). Seeing Andrea physically maimed and other members of the groups scarred by their insecurities and suspicions leaves an impression upon readers as well. While engaging this text, one cannot help but consider the dynamic of power and injustice which is being highlighted by the fact that Dexter is still being detained even though he has not committed the crime he has been accused of.

While locked up, Dexter enlists his partner Andrew and forms an escape plan. There is a cache of weapons and protective riot gear in A-Block which Rick's group has yet to discover. As the group continues about their day, Andrea bursts from the laundry room into the courtyard with Thomas in frantic pursuit (Figure 39). Blade in hand, he chases her past Allen and his twin boys. Rick intercedes with the quick fury of revenge. After he's disarmed Thomas, six panels illustrate Rick's fists repeatedly hitting his face from a low angle. Lori attempts to stop Rick cautioning he is about to commit murder as well (Figure 40); but he throws her off and Andrea ends up holding her back. Andrea, Lori, Tyreese, and Carol watch as Rick pummels Thomas and asks, “DON'T YOU DESERVE THIS?!” His anger is textually represented by large, bold lettering. The following three panels show Thomas' destroyed face from above; almost substituting our view with Rick's. By the time Tyreese pulls him off of Thomas's collapsed and bloodied visage, Rick has already severely damaged his own hands.

A key moment in the text, this beating is a catalyst for Rick's corruption and future manipulation of ethics in favor of supporting his position of power. Seemingly motivated by justice, this thrashing is another violent incident which Rick must incorporate into his sense of self. Looked to as a leader, Rick has already been changed by the pressure of surviving alone, being betrayed by his best friend, and making
decisions which resulted in deaths. In ways, he now sees his actions as the equaling or leveling forces of justice. The second grid which follows the previously described illustrates this perception in four quadrants. The first shows Rick's torso, a glimpse of his finger, and face cloaked in shadow from a low angle (Figure 41). Tyreese had asked him what he had done in the panel before, but Rick can only answer with an account of Thomas' actions: “He killed them.” The lettering has returned to normal size and the speech balloons are no longer distorted, so he seems to have calmed down some. The second panel shows an extreme close up of Rick's severely damaged, blood-soaked open right hand. One of Thomas' teeth appears to be lodged in the second knuckle of his ring finger and his palm is blacked out by shadow. The third panel is exemplary of the eclipsing nature violence has upon character (Figure 42). An extended shot shows Rick standing over Thomas' body against a virtually plain background. Rick's face is totally blacked out though. Finally, we see a close-up of Thomas's face; it is completely disfigured.

As opposed to the attacks perpetrated by the zombies, this double homicide has tested the vague social contract holding the group together. It forces the group to think long-term and construct rules for their community. A microcosmic example of society, the members must come to a conclusion about how to serve justice. The moment is pivotal for Rick, whose word holds most weight based upon his recognition as leader (Figure 43). The punishment he decrees is clearly retributive: “You kill, you die” (Figure 44). He has already broken this law as the group's leader; but for a community desiring vindication, this inconsistency does not seem to matter. Lori is the only person who contests the imposition of capital punishment and even she backs down. Rick then
sentences Thomas to hang (Figure 45). Since Lori had accused Dexter vehemently and was wrong, it seems as though she now has more reservations about making condemning judgments so quickly. The others, however, do not share her sentiments.

The method of execution which Rick voices speaks for a vengeful desire. It suggests a public spectacle where others can witness the transformation the condemned man forced others to undergo. Though his cause of death will differ from the girls', Thomas will reanimate too. Effectively he'll have to be killed twice; once for Susie and again for Rachel. Apart from setting an example, the act could provide the community with a form of closure. The punishment puts violence to a purpose of erasure, which is in its essence the same the homicide: “Violence thus has no hesitation in putting itself in the service of the Good, specifically of a Good—or, if one prefers, a Truth—that even claims to benefit the victims, defenseless and random, of that very violence” (Cavarero 85).

Violence is intensely personal; for this reason it is hard to imagine Rick or any of the other affected members of the group wanting to leave the fate of the killer to chance. If seeing is equivalent to believing, certainty of death can only be guaranteed by sight.

Yet violence further complicates the ability to see situations from an objective or detached perspective; and that stance is essential for making correct ethical decisions. As James Elkin's notes, “I do not focus on anything that is not connected in some way with my own desires and actions” (Object 22). Therefore, violence distances individuals from ethical ideals rather than restoring order after its interruption. Though Rick's decree isn't exactly an eye for an eye, it is similar in that it is an erasure of perspective. As I read his story through facial expressions and body language as well as letters, I can't help but think of Elkins's argument that drawings provide viewers a chance to consider what is
unseen (*Object 35*). The blindness that pervades *The Walking Dead* is the view that violence can be escaped. Life is inseparably linked to decomposition; and is only temporarily delayed by reanimation in the text. From this perspective, we see that every violent act performed seems to multiply into more of the same kind with unstoppable momentum especially because it is tied to the fantasy of justice. In its most condensed essence, this story is one of the effects of the misappropriation of power. Beginning with a search for governmental or militarized intervention, the first error of the characters we are introduced to through this narrative is their failure to become autonomous and their desire to return to their previous lifestyles even in the face of insurmountable change. As a result of this illusion, the autonomy of each of the members becomes compromised as the narrative progresses. After this has occurred, it becomes apparent that improvement and progress is not likely but rather its opposite, decay, is inevitable. If this is the case, the vision of a sustainable society outside of the threat of violence is an impossibility outside of what is natural. Thus the text demands a reconsideration of what can be accomplished through existence as a result of this instability.
During an interview with *Daily Dead*'s Jonathan James, Kirkman discussed his portrayal of Rick. In the interview, which was released on July 17th, 2012, Kirkman reveals his strategy of character development:

“In life I think that sometimes you’re the hero or villain, depending on perspective. In telling Rick’s story realistically, you’re not always going to like him. When you deal with human interaction, people make mistakes or decisions without thinking and it’s certainly something I’m trying to portray. There will be times when you hate Rick and times when you love Rick. This is much in the same way that the story has very slow and quiet periods that make the explosive, violent, and terrifying periods seem that much more powerful. There will be periods where you absolutely hate Rick and don’t identify with him, but that will make the later period where you are completely behind the guy that more interesting.”

“By mixing any two of our emotional primaries [anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise] we can produce a third expression which is often distinct and recognizable enough to earn its own name.” (McCloud *Making Comics* 85)

As Scott McCloud writes, “Backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas...Particularly the world of emotions” (*Understanding* 132). In this tense and charged moment, the absence of a background highlights the importance of text and draws viewer attention onto the characters portrayed. Minimizing artistic detail outside of bodily renderings, the creators have focused these frames upon the intensely personal relationship between the individual enacting violence and the individual subjected to it.
Works Cited


Fig. 1. Opening panel of *The Walking Dead*.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.
Fig. 7.

OH, THANK GOD.

Fig. 8.

IT'S TOO RISKY TO GO SOMEWHERE ELSE. THE FIRES ARE KEEPING US WARM. THERE'S PLenty OF FIREWOOD IN THIS AREA. WE'LL BE FINE HERE.

THIS IS THE BEST PLACE TO BE FOR THE RESCUE.
Fig. 15.

WE STILL ARE, SHANE. EVERYTHING’S GOING TO BE FINE!

POLICE

I THOUGHT I COULD... AND I DID. EVERYTHING WAS GOING SO GOOD. SHE WOULD HAVE COME AROUND EVENTUALLY... I KNOW IT.

SHE WOULD HAVE.

I CAN’T LIVE LIKE THIS, RICK! I THOUGHT I COULD BUT I CAN’T!

Fig. 16.

...UNTIL YOU CAME BACK!!

GOD DAMMIT, SHANE! STOP THIS!!
Fig. 17.

Fig. 18.

DONT HURT MY DADDY AGAIN!
Fig. 19.

IT'S NOT THE SAME AS KILLING THE DEAD ONES, DADDY.

Fig. 20.
Fig. 21.

Fig. 22.
Fig. 23.

Fig. 24.
Fig. 25.

Fig. 26.
Fig. 27.

Fig. 28.
Fig. 29.

Fig. 30.
**Fig. 31.**

MAGGIE SAID IT WAS DOWN THIS HALL BUT I DON’T KNOW WHICH DOOR!

HELLO?

**Fig. 32.**

GIRLS? RACHEL? SUSIE?

SAY SOMETHING IF YOU CAN HEAR ME!

IF YOU'RE HIDING BECAUSE OF THE GUN SHOTS, DON'T WORRY! THEY'RE JUST CLEANING OUT THE GYM.

WE'RE STILL SAFE--YOU DON'T HAVE TO HIDE!
Fig. 33.

Fig. 34.
Fig. 35.

MIND TELLING ME WHAT YOU THINK I DID, PSYCHO BITCH?

Fig. 36.
IF I FIND OUT YOU DID IT, I'LL BEAT YOU TO DEATH MYSELF.
Fig. 38.
Fig. 39.

Fig. 40.
Fig. 41.
Fig. 45.

WE'RE GOING TO HANG HIM.
Chapter III:  

**Speaking out for the Silent: How seeds of social growth germinate and stem from the portrayal of bodily transformations in *Saga of the Swamp Thing***

In the preceding chapter, I've mentioned that the high sales volume of serial comics warrants an examination of their content as a potential measure for identifying the interests of the reading public. Specifically, I've focused upon how works belonging to the horror genre catalog fears of social unrest which are especially relevant to democratic populations currently immersed in or in jeopardy of facing severe conflict. Since the sales of the monthly series *Saga of the Swamp Thing* rose from attracting 17,000 readers an issue in 1984 to a staggering 100,000 per new release in 1988, its upshot in popularity reflects a particular social significance (Millidge Pg. 16, Panel 3). When violent acts are performed upon the bodies of fictional characters in graphic narratives like *The Walking Dead* and *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, the content becomes poignantly affective and can work to expose potential dangers and provoke thought. For example, in the previous chapter I argued the conditions outlined by Robert Kirkman in *The Walking Dead* suggest an uncertainty surrounding the human body that seems directly related to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Similarly, as a series which experienced an exponential increase in readership over a relatively short period of time, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* can be read as a work which provides commentary upon the political climate which existed when it was produced. The armed forces of the United States had invaded Grenada in 1983 and were engaged in conflicts in multiple regions in Central America as well as the Middle East during the remainder of the decade. Considering these looming circumstances, the presence of horror impinging upon the escapist science fiction fantasy seems to coincide with fears of global crisis and mortality.
The influence of the past is wrapped up not only with the present moment but the future which will eventually follow. Like Kirkman's work, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is a graphic narrative which grew from artistic re-interpretation rather than pure invention. Though the premise of bodily reanimation that structures *The Walking Dead* is not new or innovative, it is nevertheless important. Rather than being detrimental to the import of the series, the decision of its creators to reinterpret a previously explored idea in relation to their own concerns can be seen as an incredibly valuable move in developing an informed sense of cultural identity using artistry as a vehicle for maturation.

In *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, the character for whom the work is titled acts as a symbol whose existence interrogates the supposed divisions between mankind and nature, science and divinity, and coincidence versus fate. Each of these paired forces is revealed to connect to its opposite in the work. This structural component of the graphic narrative capitalizes upon the capability of the medium to illustrate multiple perspectives and emphasize how identity is shaped in relation to both communal and environmental surroundings. In this series, writer Alan Moore and artists Stephen Bissette and John Totleben redesign a narrative about embodied consciousness and re-consider the creation of the Swamp Thing as a chance to show the potential for sentience to exist apart from human subjectivity. Whereas the first version of the character was a scientist whose body was accidentally transformed, in Moore, Bissette, and Totleben's revival Swamp Thing was never actually human despite the creature's possessing cognizance.

By taking advantage of the ability to illustrate boundaries which separate communities as well as maneuvers taken to bend or cross them, the form first transcends obsolescence by maintaining the integrity of the original project. Its main themes are
preserved, yet not entirely concluded because the work leaves room for an expansion upon topics regarding community, consciousness, and status through modification and re-interpretation. Considering that the writer who would take on the task of supplying a new storyline explaining the creature's origins and future endeavors saw his goal as loftier than simply obtaining commercial success, it is clear that the version of the narrative resulting from his collaboration with Bissette and Totleben performs an integral function of creative expression by failing to be satisfied with the worldviews expressed in the past and working to rectify them. By examining the manner in which the plot has been expanded upon and re-imagined in the later revival of the series, I show how the work capitalizes upon a consideration for the discursive nature of art and uses this foundation as a base from which to pose important questions about counter-acting political complacency.

Paradoxically, individuals are inheritors of culture as well as the agents who determine its characteristics. From an evolutionary standpoint, existence is wholly attributable to competition. Similarly, civilization's customs and conventions can be seen as the consequences of power dynamics which people are implicated in preserving and perpetuating. In this sense public agreement and accuracy are contingent as states of cause and effect; but, this is not without constant contention. Language dually functions as an instrument of creation which can claim as well as challenge; like any other representational tool, it can be used as a vehicle for expression. Whether expressed pictorially, linguistically, or through performance, art becomes a vital tool for adaptation and survival; it transforms the personal into the communal by providing an object which presents information demanding interpretation and comment. According to Scott
McCloud, art is inextricably linked to learning and self-development. He describes three main functions art performs: as providing “exercise for minds and bodies not receiving outside stimulus” (Understanding 167, panel 1) as a game would, as providing “an outlet for emotional imbalances” (ibid. panel 2) or giving materiality to ideas, and “as discovery, as the pursuit of truth, as exploration” (ibid. panel 5).

Though comics have condescendingly been called art with an asterisk, or objects which lack the rarity or skill associated with their finer counterparts, they are nevertheless artworks and are valuable precisely because of their expansive outreach. The form's low production cost and broad distribution make it the perfect medium for stimulating widespread discussion and transmitting messages with political import. Especially in the case of serially released comics like Saga of the Swamp Thing, the mass reproduction of their content and their continued introduction to large audiences illustrate the magnitude of their status as effective educational tools. In 1984, the same year Moore's debut as the series' writer hit the stands, he was quoted saying: “I don't want to get into justifying comics as art. That's just semantics. It is art, but it's not gallery art. It's cheaply available to a large number of people” (Lawley & Whitaker 34). Using the popularity of a series as an indicator for closer inspection of its content, comics can convey multiple layers of historical information. As objects which enable ideas to be shared, comics can eventually become immortalized or fade into forgotten artifacts through continued interaction, preservation, or lack thereof. Because comics place matters of concern which are typically removed from popular conversation or considered to be taboo, like violence or bodily experimentation, and write these topics into an object of frequent economic consumption, the otherwise unaddressed social content becomes more visible and
increasingly more discussed. Providing a space where topics can be treated openly and frankly through fictional representation, even when taken to extremes, strips the appearance that they are composed of an impenetrable shell and replaces this idea with the notion of a barrier constructed with permeable membrane.

Graphic narratives can then be viewed as tools for empowerment. One of the biggest problems these narratives help resolve is an absence of political voice. In 1988, during an interview with Christopher Sharrett, Moore elaborated:

Politics has become some sort of quantum science which most people would like to leave to the big boys and the experts and not bother with otherwise, which I find a profoundly dangerous notion. Now, since comics are sort of inherently garish and sensational, it might be possible to get across complex political and moral ideas in a way that would be attractive to most people and can cause people actually to sit down and read. Perhaps it's a small way of getting people to see how the study of politics applies to everyday life...I think much can be done here, and without vulgarizing or oversimplifying complex moral and political ideas... I think comics could be a way of giving things back to the public, not just in the area of politics but in, for example, the area of literature. No one reads poetry, as a case in point. It's probably the easiest thing to get published and the last thing people want to read, perhaps because in school they've had hosts of golden daffodils crammed down their throats and came away thinking that's what poetry is all about. In Swamp Thing, you may not have good poetry, but there is poetry there which people can read and enjoy and perhaps see how poetry can be connected to a larger world of ideas. It might be possible actually to give back politics and poetry to people through this medium. (Moore, Sharrett 59-60).

Not only do works of art become valuable resources for historical understanding, but their impact expands the vocabulary of those who are exposed to them and helps reconstruct expectations. By engaging art, individuals are asked to consider the relationship they share with the other people who have inhabited the planet before, concurrently, or in the future. The popular art of comics is then well suited to treat these multiple imaginations of temporal subjectivity because the medium enables creators to present information in a manner which highlights and isolates multiple moments. In this
chapter, I argue that examining the first issue of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* constructed by the collaborative efforts of Alan Moore, Stephen Bissette, and John Totleben, solidifies the sociopolitical significance of using art as a method for communal analysis and critique. In order to effectively analyze the significance of this revival narrative and understand the history behind the issue, “The Anatomy Lesson,” it's necessary to first look at how the series began and developed.

Originally envisioned by author Len Wein and artist Berni Wrightson, the character of Swamp Thing first appeared in the 92nd issue of *House of Secrets* in a stand-alone horror story with the cover-date July 1971 (Khoury and Moore 84). Swamp Thing’s existence is the tragic outcome of sinister envy and fantastic accident: Alex Olson's co-worker Damian Ridge covets his wife, Linda, so strongly that he attempts killing Olson in order to marry her. Causing Olson's lab to explode, Ridge's attempt is only partially successful. The force of the blast causes the chemicals Olson was working with and surrounding swamp combine in such a way that his body metamorphoses into a monstrous plant creature without killing him. Believing her husband perished, Linda starts to suspect Ridge and ultimately becomes threatened by Ridge's murderous tendencies as well. Though Alec is able to save her from Ridge, Linda does not recognize him. The narrative concludes with this tragic loss of human identity.

After this initial debut, *Swamp Thing* became an independent feature in 1972 and was published by DC Comics until 1976. Though the protagonist's name was changed from Alex Olson to Alec Holland, the narrative exposition of his history remained essentially unchanged. The two responsible for creating this character only produced a portion of the material during these four years; Wein wrote the first thirteen issues while
Wrightson only drew the first ten. Though their direct involvement with the project was limited in this respect, their vision was nonetheless influential in directing the path those who took over the project in the future would use to guide the narrative's outcome later on.

Len Wein became the editor of the series when it was redesigned and released the following decade. Wein was even responsible for recruiting Alan Moore as a replacement for writer Martin Pasko (Khoury and Moore 84). He extended a personal offer to Moore during a phone call in November of 1983 which would become the catalyst for the series' monumental resurrection and a major break for Moore's career as well (Millidge Pg. 15, Panel 11). In a biographic called Alan Moore: Portrait of an Extraordinary Gentleman, British comics creator and historian Gary Spencer Millidge writes, “Moore used Swamp Thing to explore social issues from racism to environmental concerns with emotional depth, against a background of existential horror. Along with the art of Steve Bissette and John Totleben, Moore turned the ailing, mostly ignored title into one of the most talked about comics of its time” (Millidge Pg. 16, Panel 2 & 3). During an interview conducted by Eclectic Electric's Steve Hanson and Christian Martius, Moore gave a more detailed account of the series' success:

I had a readership of about 25,000 people a month by the time of The Curse [Issue #40] and we got about 65,000 by the end of the series, at about a 1000 every issue. If even 1% of these people get something powerful from that comic, that’s an amazing amount of impact to have on the real world. This stuff that started out as shit in my head, now it’s having an effect in other people’s heads (Moore. Northampton, UK. 3/8/1996)

The spike in Swamp Thing's popularity is a result of several factors; but, all of these seem dependent upon the project of artistic expression as accounting for the utterances of the past and attempting to resolve any problematic discrepancies with present perspectives.
Undeniably, the success of the revamped work is directly related to its development from a previously established project. Continuing the discussion of issues posed by the first version of the series which relate to the formation and restriction of communities, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* expands the discourse surrounding these topics through content detailing violent transformations of the body which results in physical and conscious change among characters. Unlike the earlier version, this tale would not be of an unattainable quest to regain humanity. Instead, the premise of the story shifts to an interrogation of the appearance of consciousness in forms outside of embodied human subjectivity when Alec Holland's identity is severed from Swamp Thing's. According to Moore, “The main thing I wanted to understand was the character himself. I wanted a credible scientific explanation for the Swamp Thing. There were some things in the origin that bothered me. His being a plant hadn't been explored in depth” (Lawley & Whitaker 35). Attempting to build a more believable background and develop the character's potential with greater social relevance, Moore suggested a narrative where the Swamp Thing was never human but rather a completely different type of existential being.

To understand how this work can reveal patterns of imbalance within community structure and begin to unsettle public acceptance of such matters, we can again turn to Moore's vision of comics presenting an opportunity for communal ownership. He poses a general question regarding the purpose and potential of artistic expression during an interview with *Bookforum's* Steve Erickson:

As a culture we've reached a point where it's possible to think of history, time, and existence in a different way, and if literature has a function, it may lie in the assimilation of difficult new worldviews and their implications, brought on
by the inexorable progression of technologies. If art isn't here to help us comprehend the strange, unprecedented thing we're becoming, what is it here for? (Alan Moore, *Bookforum* Summer 2001, pg. 29)

According to Moore, art and literature, specifically, propose a new manner of perception which helps deconstruct the unfamiliar into terms which can be interpreted and may ultimately alter previously held views. Notice that the goal is not a total replacement or substitution of the old perspective with the view presented by the work, but rather “assimilation” or incorporation. The early views an individual has regarding a particular topic before encountering a work which comments upon that issue is still valuable, even when new points of view are revealed. Likewise, the knowledge which can be obtained by looking to the themes expressed by art is additive and facilitates inclusion and identification. This process does not merely conserve previously held beliefs or eliminate the differences made apparent through interaction with new material. Rather, works of art represent information in a way which demands interpretation. Through engagement, a viewer or reader must actively attempt to deconstruct meaning through the finished piece beyond simple acceptance or rejection. While performing this analytical process, he or she modifies old methods of order and gauges personal conclusions against the expression of other individuals.

In this respect, art can be seen as a process of building dependent upon the input of multiple individuals. This further illustrates how this series can be read as an example which highlights the interconnected nature of human existence. Equally as important as Moore's vision to the project's unprecedented success were the artists who had taken over the title before he had arrived: penciler Steven Bissette and inker John Totleben. Before working together on *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, the two had met years prior while they
were attending the Joe Kubert School in Dover, New Jersey in 1977 (Bissette 217).

Having read the original series during their youth, the two had formed ideas about its characters and imagined ways to expand the narratives surrounding these figures on their own. In an interview he provided for Millidge's anthology, Bissette explained how deep the desire to contribute to this project truly was for his co-collaborator John Totleben:

“In his heart of hearts, John really wanted to have a shot at his all-time favorite comic book character, Swamp Thing. He had already evolved his own take on the muck monster, delineated in stirring brush-and-ink renditions of the sorrow-eyed Swampy looking up from the mire, detailed in drunken conversations at the great parties classmates Tim and Beth Truman threw in their Lake Hopatcong apartment wherein John described the notion of Swamp Thing growing edible potatoes from his body, and Rick Veitch (if memory serves) suggested the bon mot of their being hallucinogenic (Bissette, “Mr. Moore & Me,” p. 217-218).

The figure was at once familiar and personal; having engaged the original stories during their youth, the two undoubtedly imagined other scenarios for the Swamp Thing to experience and reinvented him through their own perspectives. Also, their ability to freely discuss shared childhood reading experiences with friends and peers reveals how important the content of those works was to generating thought. The graphic narrative is an ideal medium for developing questions about community ethics since it can provide space to perform continued experiments with the implications of the narrative’s content against the opinions expressed by others and sustain their interest through this flexibility to adaptation. Bissette and Totleben’s shared attachment to the work and belief in its potential helped to guide the series to its current place of stature.

Initially there were difficulties, though. Starting their tenure on the revival with its sixteenth issue, “Stopover in a Place of Secret Truths” (cover dated August 1983), Bissette and Totleben were unhappy with how the prospects for the future of the project
appeared. Though the two had serious ideas about how to modify the story and advance its plot, their superiors were not receptive to these changes. Bissette remarked, “One night in early 1983, during a phone conversation in which John and I agonized over the misdirection our stint as artists on DC Comics' SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING seemed to be going, we briefly fantasized how cool it would be if we could work with that new British comics writer, Alan Moore...We imagined a kindred soul there” (*Mr. Moore & Me* 218). Whether by fate or chance their editor, co-creator of the series Len Wein, reached out to Moore and convinced him to sign onto the project.2

As a creative team, the collaborative approach these three took to completing the work became a perfect mirror for the content of connectedness or collectivism which their content also promoted. In the first letter Moore wrote to Bissette in May 1983 after accepting the job he explained, “I suppose my basic attitude to the work is that what ends up on the printed page is the only important thing. To that end, the script and art really have to be seen as one process, rather than as pictures over here and words over there...it'd be a pretty dismal waste of potential if we didn't all have equal input into the work as a whole” (ibid 219). Since the overall theme of the work favors the acceptance of interconnectedness, it seems important that the process used to construct the content which would convey this message was dependent upon the combined efforts of multiple people working toward a particular goal as well. Bissette continued, “From the get-go, it was apparent that Alan's ego was not a driving determinative force; it was the genuine desire to seek, create, nurture that elusive plane of shared existence wherein physical parameters dissolve in the mingling of ideas and dreams, to be given form through lucid, skilled and forever shared work” (ibid). With harmony as an articulated ideal proposed
by the project, it is not surprising that the team worked so well together.

When they began collaborating, they happily discovered that many of their views and ideas for the future of the series actually coincided. Some of these ideas included: using extreme facial close-ups to push readers to differentiate the main character as an organism totally dissimilar to human beings and visually stressing the appearance of the environment to demonstrate the impact of setting upon characterization. Such propositions had been dismissed as too bold by Wein when Totleben introduced them through drawings while assisting another artist, Tom Yeates, for the revival's second issue in 1977 (ibid 219-220). Discovering and developing this commonality of vision, the collaborators needed to find a way conclude any unresolved issues left unanswered by earlier releases before their entirely new imagination of the story could be constructed and revealed. As Moore and Totleben tied up “Loose Ends” in issue #20, the legacy of Saga of the Swamp Thing truly blossomed with the completion and release of issue #21, “The Anatomy Lesson.” Cover-dated February 1984, this issue broke ground for the series and, for Bissette, “remains our finest collaborate effort” (ibid. 219).

This issue works through an innovative rebirth of Swamp Thing, providing an alternate story explaining his origin. Only three characters appear in this release, one of whom acts as the narrator. Telling the story from a first person point of view is Dr. Jason Woodrue, a character modeled from the villain in DC Comics' July 1962 debut issue of Atom. Woodrue is a scientist who specializes in botanical knowledge, has attempted to take over the world, and is known within the DC Universe as the “Floronic Man” because he transformed his body into a plant/human hybrid through scientific experimentation (Saga, book I, pg. 17-panel 8). In “The Anatomy Lesson,” Woodrue has been hired by
General Avery Carlton Sunderland to determine how Swamp Thing, a creature his corporation put down in the swamps of Huoma, Louisiana, came into existence. Although he believes the creature is a transformed version of a scientist who was working on federally funded research, Sunderland has no feasible explanation to support this conclusion.

Instead of a character, the protagonist appears like any other specimen in a lab might. The experimentation Woodrue performs upon his body in the following pages is, in ways, representative of a search for identity as determined by the judgments of others. Since fiction can reflect and inform how its readers think of themselves in relation to their surroundings, it can impact the overall health of communities. By inverting the position of the hero into a space of vulnerability and experimentation the creators have unsettled the expectations of their readers. Experimentation with narrative is doubly expressed through the work's content of scientific research. Supposedly the creature frozen in Sunderland's lab was once a doctor and scientist named Alec Holland. Holland and his wife, Linda, were performing research for the government, “Developing something called a bio-restorative formula, which was intended to promote crop growth” (Saga, pg. 16, panel 2). Admittedly, this project seems to stress the benefits research can provide for society. Its aim to increase the production of food would also increase its availability to those in need of it. Ideally, this research would benefit not only the agricultural industry but humanity at large by reducing the possibility of famine and starvation. Despite these lofty ideals, the experiment was sabotaged by an explosion (Saga pg. 23, panels 1 & 4). Sunderland hypothesizes that this series of events has transformed Holland into the plant creature he's hired Woodrue to examine but is unsure
of how. As the quintessential embodiment of the desensitized, prideful capitalist, Sunderland has a vested interest in discovering an answer though. Since Linda was killed shortly after her husband's disappearance, the lab exhumed her remains to see if a similar change had occurred. They were baffled to discover it had not, and thus ruled out exposure to the formula as the single determining factor for prompting such a happening. Understandably, the mystery surrounding this case extends past the scientific realm and into the level of metaphysics regarding death as a finite marker for existence.

The title of this issue, “The Anatomy Lesson,” plays with the expectations of comics as a medium for juvenile readers while simultaneously expressing information about the content of the publication. Anyone picking up the piece for the first time could easily assume it will have a biological focus. Though the work is not an instructional or factual pamphlet, it is educationally valuable. It's a visceral exercise in engaging imagination and generating questions about the ethic of bodies as enforced by communities and the accepted correctness of justified killing. All in all, body ethic deals with the prevention of harm. This ethic addresses a spectrum of harm ranging from the relatively innocuous, where self-image might be damaged or minor injury sustained, to the extreme, where acts of brutal violence, rape, and torture would fall. An establishment of body ethic and collective agreement upon its adherence seems like a difficult task to accomplish since there is so much variation from one person to the next. However, this doesn't mean that an attempt at consensus should not be made. The desire to vocalize concerns for violations of body ethic comes in some ways from fear of the inevitability of death. Supporting this assumption and further particularizing the scope of the work is the image on which the title is overlaid. “The Anatomy Lesson” is written on the torso of a
dismembered body which is laid out across the bottom of the page, occupying almost its entire width. (Saga pg. 13). The cadaver's placement below the panels buries the title under content. This move foreshadows a narrative arc illustrating Sunderland's death and closes the action of the opening panels which will structure the remainder of the text.

The story's setting is split into two locations within the nation's capital: Woodrue's apartment and workplace. Jumping back and forth between these locations, the story also switches perspectives from one of present reflection to flashback and even briefly describes an unverifiable hypothetical imagination of transpiring events. Interestingly enough, Washington, D.C., was also the site where Woodrue's predecessor, the Plant Master, made his attempt at world domination in Atom Comics #1. Yet the expansive elaboration upon the work of past creators performed within this issue does not end with this detail. According to Moore, “the first story in Swamp Thing is based on a Goya engraving, 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters’ (Intv. with Lawley & Whitaker, pg. 40). The forty-third of eighty aquatints printed in Goya's 1799 Los Caprichos, this piece works along with the others to critique dangerous political conditions relevant to Spain's population and society in general. Only a few years before its display to the nation's northwest, France was in the midst of violent revolution including a period of widespread public executions and secret government sanctioned killing known as the Reign of Terror. In this piece which Moore claims as an inspiration for “The Anatomy Lesson,” an artist sleeps on his desk while scary creatures like bats and owls hover above him and a catlike, sinister creature stares out toward the viewer suggesting an unsettling threat to safety (Figure 1). The work and its title argue for an articulation and preservation of body ethic as metaphorically, these harmful creatures
have become manifest during the moment attention and logic have become absent.

Drawing inspiration from a number of sources including the original version of the title, the creators deliberately and effectively link an overarching theme that marks the search for knowledge through instances of physical disruption where bodies have become subject to the exertion of outside forces. It's my belief that these moments of disturbance or injury are designed to aid the development of consciousness, or self-awareness, within readers. This issue opens with the narration of Dr. Jason Woodrue in the midst of imagining the outcome of a violent death we can assume he caused. This entry into the narrative seems appropriate for an example of the horror genre, especially one dealing with Moore's goal of presenting difficult topics to his youthful readers. During an interview conducted by *The Comics Journal* he commented, “There is violence in everyday life, there is sexuality, often violent sexuality intruding into the child’s world, and in my opinion, the only way that we can possibly help our children is to give them the information that they need to deal with that” (Moore 6/13/2012). What safer space is there to expose innocents to the existence of such potentially harmful forces and possible evils than in the pages of a graphic narrative? Protective devices which dilute the severity of material presented by revelation through the lens of fiction enables young readers to contemplate issues which they might otherwise avoid or not know about. Also, industry standards like the expectation to adhere to guidelines dictated by the Comics Code helped enforce a standard which could give parents a general idea of what their children were reading if those titles had received a seal of approval.

Furthermore, the dual presentation of information through image and language helps to explain difficult concepts which many juvenile readers have been intentionally
sheltered from or not exposed to in other educational forums. Besides these advantages, this direct link between the medium and its anticipated audience opens up the capacity for creators to experiment with various techniques. Comics can appeal to large numbers of people because of their ability to present aspects of especially complex concepts whose accurate presentation hinges upon layers of information. Moore explains the appeal of the form: “It allows for layers of ambiguity and meaning, for multitrackings of narrative that other media can't approximate. When a writer has recourse to pictures as a form of narrative, it frees the text for other things” (Erickson Bookforum 28). Understandably, when basic information regarding setting or action can be supplied through image, language can be aimed at achieving more specific goals. Pairing combinations of these narrative elements could convey more information than either could alone.

Literary critic Link Yaco identifies Moore as a Post-Modernist whose work aims to use the medium to perform deconstructive moves which reveal connection between seemingly divided forces. Implicitly tied to this goal is a prompt for the reading public to face challenges which stress the ever pressing questions of the validity and value of particular viewpoints and actions. When describing how he perceived Moore's artistry, Yaco writes: “In short, he PLAYS with the form. But a sense of play is not childish—it is the basis for any serious intellectual endeavor. And, in point of fact, the purpose of play behavior is not aimless activity, but exploration of an environment. That is how we learn” (250-251). This type of play is structured through these strategies: the placement of surreal comics characters within realistic settings, the blending of styles reminiscent of early cartoons alongside those indicative of contemporary realism, and the juxtaposition of the classical against the abstract (Yaco 250). These moves prompt readers to consider
dualistic relationships of intense contrast from a new stance. By virtue of placing such extreme representations of polarized styles so carefully and deliberately nearby each other within the narrative, Moore points readers to identify commonality. This concept of commonality is directly related to an establishment of body ethic because the recognition of similarity, especially when related to vulnerability, promotes mutual respect instead of exploitation for individual gain. Since the medium through which Moore presents these corresponding concepts is typically designed to appeal to a younger audience, the manner they are portrayed must be safe for juvenile readers.

In order to accomplish this pedagogical and protective aim, Moore works not only to display commonality between victims and heroes, but also to show similarities between different villains as well. One of the most obvious examples of this type of narrative design written into issue #21 is that both Woodrue and Sunderland suffer from the same overwhelming desire for power. Though they are at odds with one another for a majority of the issue's duration, they are not dissimilar. Apart from clues revealed through dialogue, there was one particular tendency which stood out to me as incredibly significant: any time either of the two men was in a position of dominance over the other he was engaged in a minor vice. For Woodrue, this manifests through his consumption of red wine (Saga pg. 13 panel 2, pg. 18 panel 1 & 3, pg. 23 panel 5 & bottom 4 panels). Conversely, whenever Sunderland is pictured as having the upper-hand, he is shown smoking (ibid. pg. 16 panels 2 & 5, pg. 17 panels 4, 5, 7, pg. 22 panel 4 & 6, pg. 25). Although the portrayal of such behaviors would offer precious little to the narrative if only one man engaged in this type of conduct, because the tendency is attributed to both it becomes easier to recognize their other shared yearning to possess dominating
authority. This subtle, but discernible, way to reveal information struck me as particularly memorable.

As theorist Mark Ledbetter writes in his book *Victims and the Post-Modern Narrative*, “To be playful is to practise politics and ethics. While the rules of any game, particularly language's game, may be superficial constructs, they do exist; if not, we play the game alone. And we must remember, rules are political even if necessary. I think that the critical question is, ‘Who makes the rules?’” (5) By virtue of being born and raised within a community among others, it is natural and necessary to learn and copy behaviors and habits. Witnessing, assessing, and mimicking simple acts are the crucial means by which an individual develops an awareness of his or her surroundings. Through these exercises a person becomes cognizant of how participation reinforces social standards; and then he or she can begin to question how routines considered to be normal came to be so commonly accepted. Similarly, testing the congruence of social roles against political idealism is a more complex adaptation of this type of play which manifests in *Saga of the Swamp Thing*. Moore's Post-Modern approach is lofty: “He wants to do more than convey a summary of cultural codes. He wants to examine the mechanism of fiction. To do this he turns it inside out and back again. He displays its falsehoods and then convinces us it’s real again” (Yaco 250). The constant back and forth which challenges a reader's notion of certainty about the content of the text cautions of a world constructed in an even more complex manner: that world is reality. However, it is this complexity which makes Moore's work appealing. Yaco speculates, “The reason Moore's rationalizations work so well for many of us is that we get to enjoy the somewhat guilty pleasure of reading comic books, for an intelligent adult viewpoint has been overlaid on
the visceral thrills of the material. We have the best of both worlds—a youthful sense of wonder and a mature reflection upon it” (ibid. 252).

The intricacies of each image can also reveal complex layers of information. One way in which these levels of information manifest in this issue of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is through the manipulation of color. The first page illustrates panels that blend separate physical spaces through a wash of dark blue and black lines which signify rain falling onto glass. Similar dark blues and greens are juxtaposed against vibrant oranges and reds throughout each of the pages within the publication. These devices highlight differences between characters through contrast. Alongside this gloomy imagery, a level of darkness is added by the symbolic significance of the bright reds which appear on the page. This color is used sparingly; it only appears in six of thirteen panels which make up the grid, and its placement seems deliberate. Twice red is used to fill the contents of Woodrue's glass; this move in any other circumstance could easily be seen as a harmless representation of wine. However, when this is read against the way the color is shown in the three right most panels a different sentiment is called to the reader's mind. Here red symbolizes blood—as is clearly expressed through the text; linguistically the word is recorded four times. The panel positioned at the grid's center illustrates the left half of the iris of Woodrue's right eye in vivid red. This takes on a meaning of maliciousness tying Woodrue to Sunderland, the old man we see eclipsed by the color in the following panels. Beginning with the rightmost panel in the second row, the amount of red in each of two the panels below it increases exponentially from one to the next, until the red finally takes up almost the entirety of the page's last panel. Power dynamics revealing positions of authority are expressed not only through the appearance of Woodrue's eye in
the center of the page but also by the fact that multiple panels are used to construct a portrait of a portion of his face whereas the face belonging to the old man has been represented in full three times in individual panels. Moreover, the inclusion of the title upon a dismembered torso surrounded by separated appendages stresses that homicide is a crime which prompts a concern for identification. Victims must be identified and their causes of death must be determined as well. This entry point suggests that there is a macabre element of immorality which exists even in individuals who purport to be healers.

According to Giuseppe Pili, “We might define Moore's stories as 'lucid interactions' Calling them 'games' would be reductive: they are complex and refined challenges, which gradually screen the players” (33). This statement indicates that there are multiple levels which structure the stories told by Moore and his collaborators. Furthermore, it implies that engaging these works is an experience atypical of other types of reading. Rather, Pili argues the material is experienced at the level of the subconscious; and working through it is a process which a reader is not entirely aware of until he or she has reached the narrative's conclusion. In ways, the activity seems to echo the trajectory of dreams; before we even become aware we are experiencing an altered state of consciousness, we are already completely immersed within it. For this reason, the subtlety of the work's larger universally applicable themes may be missed by those not open to or unwilling to seek out their existence and the evidence supporting it. Yet an intellectual unraveling of information is still prompted by the work's educational foundation.

The second page furthers the unsettling of the illusions of power and safety by
taking us within the complex belonging to the old man who readers have just witnessed fall victim to homicide. The page is constructed to mimic the physical construction of the building: a long panel slants upward from the bottom of the page and other panels extend horizontally under the frame of Woodrue's gaze running as floors within a building might. Though Woodrue mocks the flaw of excessive hubris he attributes to the old man, he demonstrates the same prideful tendency. When describing the haughty tour given by his doomed employer he states, “He was so proud of it. Like a child with the biggest dollhouse in the world” (Saga 14, panel 2). In this moment, Moore explicitly draws attention to the play involved in narrative construction. Having Woodrue describe Sunderland's office as a dollhouse conveys a tone of condescension and unsettles the certainty that security provided by technology is absolute or cannot be outsmarted.

Though readers can recognize the inevitability of the old man's doom from dialogue alone, color again acts as a strong indicator for characterization on the second page of the issue. Besides Woodrue's red eyes, which are drawn looming over the rest of the panels, the only other time red is used it fills the background of the fourth panel. Here readers can assume the color emphasizes his malicious intentions since the prior page had utilized the device to foreshadow Sunderland's death. Paired with this knowledge, the conclusion that red is representative of the doctor's evil schemes is supported by the dialogue he expresses: “It's very empty... I'd expected a higher security profile” (Saga 14 panel 4). In the panel where this speech is recorded, Woodrue is entirely surrounded by a dark red background instead of the setting of the building he is touring. Visual clues like the use of the color red signify particular sentiments to readers and enable them to quickly absorb information as stylistic patterns cause a repetition of
Apart from this deliberate switch in color composition, Woodrue's dual portrayal as seemingly human and also as a dissimilar blue skinned, red eyed figure disrupts the reader's identification of him and promotes skepticism about his or anyone's appearance as a good indicator for identity. Since these prefatory pages have yet to name or introduce the series' protagonist in any direct way, the creators have done a good job in demonstrating the vast and complex nature of the possible world which is imagined through the story. So far, the dialogue expressed by each of the two characters shows they each have a degree of knowledge concerning the narrative’s setting and purpose beyond the scope of the readers' present understanding. The focus upon their thoughts and actions emphasizes power dynamics which in time reveal that the protagonist, Swamp Thing, has been subject to victimization and captivity as well.

At the tour's and page's end, the two arrive at the chamber where the protagonist is being held. Woodrue remarks with surprise, “He's in Here? How long has he...?” (Saga 14 panel 6) His guide replies, “About two weeks. He's been here since we shot him” (ibid). Almost automatically, technology and violence are positioned alongside one another. They are revealed in this setting to be mechanisms which are used, disparagingly, to support clear violations of body ethic and impose power over others. It isn't until the issue's third page where readers are actually given a glimpse of the body of the narrative's protagonist. Moreover, visual clues become even more important to generating a sense of power dynamics and illustrating the hierarchies which are questioned throughout the text on the space of this page. Composed of only two panels, the uppermost depicts Woodrue and his boss as they peer down into the chamber of the
Swamp Thing, whose frozen body is centered between a mass of tubes. Agape with bullet wounds his body looks, as Woodrue remarks, “...Gray, brittle, tattooed by frost, quite dead” (Saga 15). Although the other characters believe Swamp Thing was once human, they deny him the right of burial and treat him as an object to be manipulated for their own desires. This exploitation is justifiable because it is seen as a means for both Woodrue and Sunderland to accomplish their own goals; and also because the body of Swamp Thing which is being used as a mechanism to achieve these ends theoretically has no recourse. Personally, I believe that this clear expression of separation between species is necessary in order for the work to be able to begin to approach the necessity of posing questions regarding what truly defines communities and the values of its members.

Throughout the course of this issue, the three social functions McCloud identifies as specifically performed by art seem to appear as thematic motivations (Understanding 167). First, the notion of a game or intellectual exercise undertaken for the purpose of defeating challenge seems to manifest in Woodrue's desire to outsmart his employer. Not only does he refer to Sunderland's facility patronizingly as a “dollhouse”, even Sunderland's own descriptions of the site are completed using metaphors contrasting the complex security systems with simple game equipment: “And I control everything from a console no bigger than a checkerboard” (Saga 14 panel 5). Reducing the complex activities and systems considered by these characters to the terminology of simple games gives readers a greater access to understanding the themes introduced. At stake is an argument for naturalism and environmental preservation which includes an immediate need to reconsider how human identity is wrapped up with the natural environment which supports and sustains life. By deconstructing these ideas and relaying them through the
acts of fictional characters, readers are better able to absorb, reflect on, and comment upon their significance. This tool enabling the development of opinion falls in line with McCloud's second purpose of art as a heroic act of self-assertion. Within the story, this purpose is wrapped up with the third function of pursing discovery or truth and manifests jointly through Woodrue's perception of his research and application of its findings.

On the fifth page of the issue Woodrue reveals that in this possible world, transformations which alter the basic genetic make-up of the body, like the one which Sunderland believes Alec has undergone, are indeed possible. The drawings which have represented him up to this point have been unable to convey a full sense of his true being; by this I mean that Woodrue is not simply a doctor or criminal, but also a body who has been transformed by scientific experimentation as well. Yet this has been hinted by the switch between his portrayal as a blue creature while speaking directly to the audience and portrayal as a regular person while speaking to Sunderland. Unlike the explosion which created Swamp Thing, Woodrue's transfiguration is a result of his own action. Implicating the character as an agent of bodily change, he is depicted spraying a red aerosol can which dissolves his artificial skin in the fifth page's fourth and fifth panels (Saga 17). Woodrue's hand transforms into a dripping mess of yellow lines. By this time the reader has seen the character appear in three very different forms; this tactic illustrates that identity and physical appearance are not singular states but rather are features which can be concealed as well as changed. Considering that this story is based upon revealing misconceptions surrounding the relationships between physicality, identity, and individuality within communities, seeing confusion manifest in numerous ways is valuable to the project of prompting skepticism about accepted norms. In this moment,
Woodrue also receives a different name, “the Floronic Man.” He is typified as a kind of person, albeit an unusual one. This name suggests variance between those who make up communities while further separating the Swamp Thing from belonging to any already established ones.

However, because this narrative shows connections rather than creates divisions, this differentiation has a layered meaning. I argue that this expression of a narrative ethic is presented to readers through violent transformations which alter the bodies of characters subjected to them and therefore force readers to contemplate their resonating effects. Identifying the impact such transformations have upon the behaviors and perceptions of the characters portrayed will lead to an affective experience of sympathy, empathy, or at least thoughtful consideration for most readers. When Woodrue begins the autopsy upon the creature, he even expresses a desire for the commonality, “Since the bio-chemical fluke that had transformed me, I had longed for a chance to examine another human-vegetable hybrid. I could learn so much” (Saga 18, panel 4). This confession is paired alongside an act of bodily transformation: dissection. Since the body Woodrue is examining is purportedly dead, the act does not necessarily seem violent because it should not cause any pain. This assumption is incorrect, though. By removing parts of Swamp Thing's body and analyzing them, Woodrue determines that Swamp Thing is not now, nor ever has been, Alec Holland...or even human. Through this discovery, Woodrue also realizes that the body he's been analyzing is still living! He arrives at this conclusion by combining anatomical and botanical knowledge. After discovering growths similar in shape and location to the organs found in a human body, Woodrue must confront a myriad of questions. Though these growths share a structural
resemblance, their composition disallows the possibility that they could function as a person's corresponding organs would: “But human lungs have tiny capillary tubes that let oxygen pass through into the blood, that's what lungs are for. These vegetable fibers are too coarse to allow molecules of oxygen through in that way. These things suck and blow...and they don't do anything else. They don't work. They're not lungs.” (Saga 19 panels 2 & 3). If the being who has been the focus of the entire narrative investigation up to this point has never been human, what is the significance of this creature's natural tendency to copy a pattern of growth similar to the development of the human body? Evolution, in a Darwinian sense, seems to be challenged since two separate species, one plant and the other human, have become conflated. This process of development, which differs from readers' ideas concerning the theory, has become accelerated as a result of both human interference and chaotic accident. In a strange twist, an extension of nature, typically romanticized as a pure or ideal state, is attempting to morph itself into the human form. Here Moore suggests that commonality exists between both people and plants. Since Swamp Thing's plant body is mimicking human anatomy, it only seems appropriate for readers to expect that he will be treated with a body ethic equivalent to the respect idealized in interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the Swamp Thing’s attempt to mimic human anatomy also strengthens the affect readers feel when seeing him being subjected to violent bodily experimentation; these details move readers to sympathize with the creature’s victimization in a more powerful and emotional manner. Up until this moment the protagonist has been believed to have been dead; once readers realize he is not, their perception about what is being done to his body without his knowledge or consent cannot remain unchanged.
Eventually, Woodrue begins to unpack the meaning of his latest finding by expanding his analysis to include consideration for other living organisms besides humans. He specifically cites a more simplistic organism, the planarian worm, to explain how the creature in the lab has come into existence. Woodrue passionately describes an experiment where one worm was taught how to run a maze before being chopped up and fed to others. After digesting this educated worm, the others were able to go through the maze: “The implication is that consciousness and intelligence can be passed on as foodstuffs!” (Saga 22 panel 7). Woodrue concludes that the bio-restorative formula Alec had been working on as well as his bodily remains were absorbed by the many plants and other organisms in the swamp and digested. “Those plants eat him...and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realize it is no longer alive!” (ibid 23, panel 4). If consciousness can be transferred, defining individuality and authenticity is a complicated task. Especially because transference of identity hinges upon ingestion in this example, it is metaphorically related to consumerism. Extending this metaphor of identity formation beyond the intake of solid nutrients to include absorption of other kinds of nourishment, whether cognitive or material, allows readers to reflect upon how the media they interact with has played a role in developing who they are. In this respect, readers can be compared to the planarain worms because they are actively consuming what others have learned and demonstrated knowledge of through comics.

Again, the educative function comics and other narratives perform hinges upon their ability to translate and compress ideas into a form which can be absorbed by others. The significance of identifying connection between individuals as belonging to a larger whole is that this act prompts questions about the power dynamics which structure
experience. The creators go to great lengths to illustrate clash between forces which, despite having the appearance of being unrelated, are actually deeply connected. For example the severe attitude of shrewd businessman, General Sunderland, seems to war with the impassioned intellectualism of the scientist he's hired to unravel the mystery behind Swamp Thing's creation. Each is an equal partner in progressing the narrative regardless of their possessing different goals. Despite the significance of his findings, Sunderland dismisses Woodrue, who has performed the task demanded of him and is now obsolete if not a liability. In this light, Sunderland can be read as a means for Moore to critique corporate capitalist greed because he fully intends to use Woodrue's discoveries to advance his own career and profits. Sunderland's greed is a tragic flaw which prevents him from realizing the gravity of the findings; in his shortsighted dismissal of Woodrue, he's missed the most important conclusion of the research—the creature he assumes is dead is actually living. Sunderland's possession of vast wealth and power has blinded him from seeing the agency others possess.

This illusory power is not left unchecked by Moore, Bissette, and Totleben. Embittered by being fired and unwilling to accept the insult, Woodrue reprograms the systems his former employer had bragged so frequently about. He sets a plan of revenge in motion by setting the cryochest, or frozen chamber, where Swamp Thing is being contained to thaw and adjusting the security settings to prevent his previous employer's escape after the creature's awakening. Banking on the assumption that his research is correct and that, “It was a plant that thought it was Alec Holland! A plant that was trying its level vest to be Alec Holland” (Saga 24, panel 1), Woodrue sets in motion the means necessary for another who has been wronged by Sunderland to retaliate.
The remainder of the issue focuses upon Woodrue's imagination of how the events following Swamp Thing's awakening may have transpired. Juxtaposing a realistic and identifiable character, Sunderland, against the phantasmagorical Swamp Thing and pitting one against the other is in ways demonstrative of a Post-Modern ethic (Yaco 250). The polarizing distance between the two presents a dichotomy locating the forces of science, specifically corporate sponsored inquiry, and nature in opposition. At this point the dichotomy displayed could be argued to divide humanity and other forms of life, since Sunderland is the only living human character who has participated in the narrative's unfolding thus far. Throughout the entirety of this issue, Swamp Thing only speaks one utterance to Sunderland to let him know that he's read Woodrue's research file and possesses the knowledge that he is not and will never be human. This disclosure is paired with an image of Swamp Thing's human like teeth (Saga 30 panel 5). Reminiscent of the issue's opening page, the creature's facial portrait is composed in part across multiple panels, both the third and fifth. Conversely, Sunderland's face appears in full four times on the page. Three of the panels on the page also show Swamp Thing's eyes as intensely red like Woodrue's have been: the second merely shows a glimpse from a right-side profile while the third and seventh are close-ups of yellow irises surrounded by red scleras. These representational choices reflect that the power dynamic has changed in favor of the Swamp Thing, who appears both massive and intimidating. Through Woodrue's file Swamp Thing has learned of the violence he was subjected to: he's been shot, frozen, and experimented upon all for the advancement of Sunderland's own desires. Even if he is not a human, he has experienced the belief that he was indeed human before and thus such extreme violations of bodily ethic which he has endured cannot be
What follows is a moment of emotional retribution where the creature who once possessed the illusion of human consciousness through the identity of Alec Holland becomes transformed into a violent monster because of having been treated unethically and inhumanely. Swamp Thing is deliberately and scientifically proven not to be human, but there is still an authentic and genuine thread which asks readers to empathize with his existence and even the violent act he will commit in the pages following. That empathy is key for Moore's ecopolitical and ecological conscience. After Sunderland stumbles upon Swamp Thing in his office and shares the brief exchange detailed above, the narrative becomes one of murderous pursuit. While chasing the old man down, the Swamp Thing emits guttural yells which extend across the entire width of both pages 19 and 21 (Saga 31 & 33). These fierce shouts of “MMMMMMMUURRAAAAAGH” and “AAAAA,” made up of twenty-three letter A's increasing in size from left to right, convey a being totally consumed with rage. On the former page, this raucous, ear splitting cry spans across the top two panels from a close-up of the Swamp Thing's mouth dripping wet with saliva and into the next above him smashing Sunderland's furniture. The second panel reinforces the magnitude of Swamp Thing's anger by depicting the upper half of his body cloaked in shadow except for his glowing red eyes while he smashes the old man's desk. In this panel's lower left corner, a broken Newton's cradle which had sat on Sunderland's desk is shown flying upward. This object uses swinging spheres to demonstrate the conservation of energy. Drawn upon the face of each of these silver spheres is the reflection of the horrified face of Swamp Thing's target. By choosing to display this object being propelled through the air, the artists have prompted
consideration for Newton's third law of motion: when a force is exerted upon one body by another, the second body will simultaneously exert a force of equal magnitude in the opposite direction. A series of violent forces have been exerted upon the Swamp Thing and now it seems not only fitting but necessary that he counteract those forces with his own actions.

Another significant aspect of the beginning of the conflict cataloged on this page is that information is dispersed by Woodrue's imaginative descriptions rather than by dialogue between the parties involved. In the gutter under panel two, “I am thinking about the old man,” below panel three, “I am thinking about the cracking of his joints as he runs,” and underneath the final panel, “I am thinking of the terror in his ancient, atrophied heart” (Saga 31). This maintains the integrity of intensity and chaos for the two directly involved in the moment while also highlighting the importance of reflection upon acts driven purely by emotion. Also, this approach seems reminiscent of Goya's work because it incorporates thoughts, monsters, rationality, and dreams (Figure 1). In an interview, Moore explained a motivation behind this method of conveying information:

A lot of writers use the thought balloons to explain all their characters' pretty feeble motivations. In the middle of a fight, there's this big slab of metaphysics above their heads. You don't think when you're in a fight, apart from “AARGH! BURN! DESTROY!” You certainly don't start thinking deep and inner thoughts of Immanuel Kant or anything like that. You don't run through a sort of philosophical tract, especially when someone's trying hard to bend a steel girder 'round your head, believe me. (“Alan Moore & Gary Leach” 1983, p.12)

By using Woodrue as the narrative voice in this situation, Moore is able to focus in upon particular details of a series of tumultuous actions. Though Woodrue's words are not objective in the least and are clearly fueled by his own desires, they provide a place from which readers can gauge how violence is perceived and even orchestrated by those not
present to witness it transpire. Limiting the amount of text in this sequence enables readers to focus in upon the images and consider how quickly hostility can escalate. Also, by showing an individual physically outside of the immediate situation so deeply invested within it emotionally, the creators have posed questions about the basic nature of communal relations. Regardless of being physically affected by the outcome of a violent act, often times individuals will feel after effects based upon what changes that force exerts upon the surrounding environment.

On the next page of the issue where Swamp Thing issues a guttural yell while in pursuit of Sunderland, the text isn't nearly as sparse. However, imagination is still a key component of the plot as well as an action demanded of the reader. McCloud states that this process is a crucial activity for existence which is capitalized upon by the comics medium; he calls it “closure” (*Understanding* 63). According to McCloud closure is the, “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (ibid panel 1). Noting the limits of human sensory experience, McCloud notes this process must be performed repeatedly throughout all people's lives in order to make sense of their environment. People are constantly committing closure, “mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience” (ibid panel 2). When one uses the information garnered from the images and text contained within a comic's panel to fill the gap between it and the next which follows, he or she is committing closure. This process becomes foregrounded on page twenty-one of the issue's original publication (*Saga* 33) when the first four panels depict the Swamp Thing as he comes nearer to Sunderland; in the first he is shown as a tiny black figure and in each subsequent panel the background becomes more eclipsed by his body which is shown from progressively closer angles. As the focus upon
the creature becomes tighter, the twenty-three letter A's signifying the creature's yells below also become larger and, we might speculate louder. These maroon letters harken back to the images of blood and Woodrue's eyes. They also differ from the textual captions on the rest of the page and exemplify a montage relationship of word/picture combination because they are physically incorporated with the images and are essential to conveying necessary information (McCloud, *Understanding* 154).

Closure for these four panels is rather simple, but for the remaining three it is much more speculative. The focus on these remaining panels is upon the right hand: a body part whose image signifies moral and ethical implications. In the foreground of panel five, the Swamp Thing's right hand is slightly open with curved fingers. He looks ready to clasp it violently around Sunderland, whose position in the background with his back turned and both hands raised over his head suggests surrender and vulnerability. The sixth panel shows Sunderland's right hand cloaked in nearly pure black shadow against the bright red screen of his security system's control panel; since red has shared a connotation with evil and malevolence, especially in this issue, this image reinforces Woodrue's influence while doubly reinforces Sunderland's wrongdoing. The black shadow extending from his fingertips past his wrist stresses the sinister and corrupt nature of his work. Layered on top of this long panel, the seventh, and final on the page, shows the reverse angle of Sunderland's hand with his palm against impenetrable glass without a possibility of escape. On the next page, Swamp Thing completes the violent homicide readers have come to expect but in somewhat of an unconventional manner. Swamp Thing lifts Sunderland by his head, and appears to smother him by pressing him into his massive chest (*Saga* 34 panels 2-5). Death almost seems to come through an embrace.
If we read each character as a representation of a particular viewpoint, Sunderland's death seems to symbolize the end of exploitative behavior with the emergence of a new type of consciousness. It is possible that the creature snapped the old man's neck in the process but the method is overshadowed by the act. According to Woodrue's final remarks, the “dying” (*Saga* 34, panel 6 & gutter below 7) is what ultimately matters and the details by which this killing is accomplished are less important than their outcome. When compared against Woodrue's passionate and emotive manner of storytelling which has characterized the issue, this determination seems doubtful. However, this contradiction could serve as another example suggesting layers of concealment or inherent hypocrisy of hierarchical relationships.

The narrative wraps up with Swamp Thing simply leaving behind the deceased body of Sunderland while Woodrue concludes his soliloquy (*Saga* 35). Above Woodrue a series of three panels which are a near reversal of his rapid approach two pages before depict Swamp Thing's exit. As Swamp Thing's body takes up less space in each progressive panel, the focus upon Sunderland's face in the foreground becomes tighter. Closure is easy to perform in this moment along with the conclusion of Swamp Thing's vendetta. Woodrue's closing remarks which appear afterward seem to suggest otherwise though. On this last page, he is shown in three different positions. First he's shown from behind totally in shadow. Next, a right-side profile from the torso up where he is drinking wine with a raised glass and being covered partially by vegetation and cross-hatched shadows. Overlapping this image is the caption: “For the moment I am content simply to think, and to plan...” (ibid.) In this instance, readers are pushed to realize that Sunderland's death is not an ultimate conclusion. Signifying the relative insignificance of
an individual person's death to the environment he or she had once inhabited, the two beings with genetic relation to the Earth's plant life survive and continue living into the future. This sequence of events implies there is an urgent necessity for one to think about life as existing beyond his or her finite, embodied existence. Moreover, the acceptance of this idea also doubles the notion of embrace as causing death; in this case egocentricity has been revealed as a viewpoint incapable of being sustained. Lastly, Woodrue appears in a partial portrait made up of ten panels from where he stares from his window out at the reader. This moment is reminiscent of Goya's “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” as it also confronts the viewer with the image of suspicious, threatening creatures (Figure 1).

As I read these pages, I found myself thinking that if Sunderland had showed respect for all beings regardless of whether they were human or belonged to another species would have produced an entirely different outcome in the story. There seems to be an urgent need for an identification of an ethic to ensure mutual survival. Ironically, though, the conclusion and its focus on Woodrue reveal that the pursuit of personal power through the exploitation of others leads to individual demise and replacement. This narrative asks readers to look beyond personal concerns and consider how individual prosperity is related to the level at which that condition exists for others. Readers are asked to contemplate the intersection of the scientific and the spiritual, indicating both as necessary avenues for pursuing answers to unknown questions. More specifically, the blending of these two seemingly diametrically opposed viewpoints stresses that progress can be made through fusion and incorporation rather than exclusion. The latter is shown to actually limit or hinder understanding. Through this fictional context, the creators are
able to issue an urgent call for the reform of lifestyles which have resulted from a flawed desire to found identity upon the exertion of dominance over others and thus encourage environmental exploitation. Link Yaco praises the value of this change of consciousness: “That is what Moore and his readers are doing—learning. Which is why his work is so much more rewarding than that of lesser lights. Moore succeeds in his aims more than many who have attempted it because he manages to make the experience enjoyable” (Yaco 252). Drawing attention to this power dynamic through conflict, Saga of the Swamp Thing offers readers a solution or counter by presenting the possibility of an alternate conception of identity as informed by commonality. This would mean favoring of harmony instead of individualism, or, more simply, an acknowledgment of the relation and symbiosis between all elements, whether living or not, which make up a universe. Moreover, this series gives voice to plant-life and contends that there is a will which exists and shapes the world independently of human desire or resistance.
According to comics historian Robert C. Harvey, “The cover dates on comic books are not equivalent to the months of publication. Because of the vagaries of newsstand sales, comic books are cover-dated a month or more after their scheduled publication date. Any given issue of a periodical is presumed to be outdated by the time the next issue appears, so retailers customarily dispose of “last month's” issue of a comic book or magazine when “this month's” issue arrives. But if this month's issue late in arriving (or never arrives—always a possibility in the early days of comic book publishing), last month's issue will stay on the stand until the month of its cover-date is past. Thus, cover-dating a comic book a month or more after its actual date of publication provides a way of giving it a longer newsstand life. For example, if a comic book is published in January but cover-dated March (a typical interval between dates), it can stay on the newsstand for as long as three months, during which time it is more likely to sell out than if it were cover-dated February and removed from the stands at the end of that month. (275-276).


An interesting anecdote about Len Wein and Alan Moore's first conversation:

“I wish I could remember at this late date exactly what it was that prompted me to call Alan when I was looking for a new writer to take over Swamp Thing. I know I had been a fan of Alan's work on 2000 A.D. and so he seemed an interesting choice as writer, assuming, of course, he was available and so inclined. I got his phone number somehow, made the international phone call, and Alan answered on the third ring. I introduced myself, told Alan I had an offer to make him, and he hung up on me.

When I called back, assuming the connection had been broken accidentally, I introduced myself again. Alan's reply: “No, who is this really?” And he started going through a list of his mates, trying to figure out who had put me up to this and why. It took me quite awhile to convince Alan I was indeed me, and that I was interested in offering him work in the states, on my own precious baby. It took a lot of cajoling and convincing to talk Alan into taking on the assignment, but I'm glad he did. The changes he made on Swamp Thing helped to revolutionize the art form, his language was pure music. Under Alan, the graphic narrative suddenly grew up. And the comic book industry has never been the same since.”


In this issue, Sunderland's title and first name are not supplied. His last name is only mentioned twice: first on panel 5 of page 26 (pg. 14 in the original publication) and second in reference to his company's resources in panel 4 of page 29 (pg. 17 originally).
Works Cited


Fig. 1- Francisco de Goya y Lucientes “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.” Plate 43 of *The Caprices (Los Caprichos)*, 1799.