“When I was a little kid, I knew exactly what comics were. Comics were those bright, colourful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights... Sure, I realised that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare - but they don’t *have* to be!” (SCOTT McCLOUD)

Is there more to comics than simply ZAP and KAPOW?

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As the medium of comics and sequential art enters its second century of existence, and takes on an ever-growing role in popular culture, the question is increasingly being posed of whether or not comic books can truly be accepted as “literature”. There has been much discussion of the artistic possibilities of the medium, yet far less of whether or not comics can hold true literary aspirations. It is my intention to show that there is simply no valid reason for dismissing the idea, and that a medium in which it is art that is traditionally highlighted has a lot to offer the literary world. First of all, I shall briefly examine the technical aspect of comics, and outline the unique storytelling possibilities of sequential art, before discussing the select number of writers and artists who have harnessed these possibilities and created work that deserves serious consideration as literature.

In a world where *Harry Potter* novels can be considered for serious literary discussion, it seems strange that comics, which have for a at least a good quarter of a century been used to tell truly intelligent “grown-up” stories, are still seen as juvenile, lowest-common-denominator fare. The general public’s perception of comics is arguably the biggest hindrance to the medium’s ability to grow, and is something of a self-perpetuating cycle. If comics creators are constantly told by the world at large that their work is not worthy of serious consideration, then it is easy to understand their reluctance to break out of the garish “all in color for a dime” superhero stories that the medium is so readily associated with.

To make a bold point, for the sake of argument, the world of comics contains pictorial art that, in some cases, were it isolated, would be lauded as great art. Similarly, there have been examples of complex, dense, intelligent writing in comics for many years, and were such writing simply in prose form, there would surely be little question of its literary worth. It seems that the one thing that harms the general perception of comics more than any other is the issue of form - the fact that comics generally present an apparently unacceptable juxtaposition of words and pictures, in a format traditionally intended as cheap and disposable. Yet judging a medium solely on its form, solely on the

purpose it was originally intended to serve, is prejudiced in the extreme, and ignores the unique possibilities of comics as a medium[1].

It is a simple enough thing to state that there is no reason why the form of comics *prevents* them from being considered as "literature". Comics can be simply described as illustrated prose, just as they can be described as art with words. Both descriptions are highly simplistic, and ignore the symbiotic and unique relationship between words and pictures that comics presents, but they do highlight the fact that comics' form should be no barrier to their acceptance as literature, assuming that the content is of sufficient standard. However, rather than simply making apologies for the medium, I would like to take a moment to consider the unique ways in which comics can present story.

The juxtaposition of words and pictures offer many opportunities to do things with story that simple prose simply cannot. Arguably foremost among these is the manner in which comics can handle time, particularly seamless transitions. A comic book page can have three panels, the first two separated only by a matter of milliseconds, and then have a gap of a hundred years to the third. Yet, particularly if the imagery is consistent and the accompanying text flows, the transition can feel perfectly natural. Furthermore, writers such as Alan Moore particularly like to challenge the reader's mind with such juxtaposition, as Moore explains :

> "Comics is a medium that, almost uniquely, brings both halves of the brain into play at once. That is, when you look at a comics panel, the right brain decodes the pictures at the same time the left brain decodes the words. There are many ways to exploit this process as an artist; for example, by creating an image that shows one thing and accompanying it by text that says something quite different, you can achieve a sort of flash in a reader's mind."[2]

[1] I should perhaps at this point clearly assert the dual meaning of the word "comics"; a plural word that is a shorter form of "comic books" (i.e. describing a number of individual comic books), and a singular word that defines the medium (in the manner of "film")
[2] H. Bender, *The Sandman Companion* (Titan/DC, 1999), p.5

That is not to say that films cannot play with time (the famous breakfast table scene in *Citizen Kane* is arguably the closest that film has come to translating the power of comic book imagery onto the screen), nor that prose cannot provide effective imagery that echoes and fixes in the reader's mind. Yet the combination of such storytelling power is unique to comics. In *Watchmen*, for example, Moore crafts a chapter based entirely around the idea of symmetry. The way in which he and artist Dave Gibbons build the entire structure of the chapter around this conceit simply would not be possible in any other medium - only comics would allow them to have the layout of the panels, the colouring, the imagery and even some of the dialogue be entirely symmetrical from the centre of the chapter outwards. Because the way in which the brain absorbs such aspects as the pages' layout is subconscious, images of symmetry are lodged in the reader's mind without ever feeling forced. The fact that comics have something unique to offer is one of the main reasons not to dismiss their role in literature.

It is only after closer examination of the possibilities of the form that one can perhaps begin to gain an understanding of why comics should not be so easily dismissed. Yet all this talk of *potential* is meaningless if all that the comics industry produces is the sort of one-dimensional fare most readily associated with the medium. While I would push for recognition of their importance to popular culture, I would not go so far as to claim that the majority of comic books deserve consideration as great literature, just as I would not attempt to bestow the same accolade upon the latest Jackie Collins novel. However, it is a simple fact that there are comics works out there that are of sufficient quality to be considered as "literature" on their own terms, regardless of genre. Two graphic novels in particular stand out, for two shared reasons - they have both won notable literary awards, and they both tell "real life" stories; that is to say, there are no superheroes, or space ships, or fairies, or anthropomorphic personifications. One is autobiographical, and one is fiction partly based around autobiography.

The first of these two works is possibly the one piece of comic book fiction most well-known to, and most read by, people that have never read any other comic before -

Art Spiegelman's *Maus : A Survivor's Tale*. Spiegelman was previously a noted underground cartoonist, known for the way in which his work often broke the rules of conventional graphic storytelling. Yet few within the comics world can have been prepared for *Maus*, which is perhaps the strongest example yet of a starkly simplistic style of art being used to tell a deep and involving story. Spiegelman tells the twin stories of his relationship with his father Vladek, and Vladek's own Holocaust memories, using a cartoony style that portrays the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats. Somehow, perhaps because Spiegelman imbues it with a deep and involving humanity, or perhaps simply because it is true, the combination works. Striking perhaps the biggest blow yet in comics' continual struggle to be accepted as literature, *Maus* was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1992 following the publication of its second volume, the first comics work to win such a high-profile literary award.

No work in the comics field has ever captured the imagination of the non-comics-buying public in quite the same way as *Maus*, but in the last few years there has been one book in particular that has come very close to doing so. *The Adventures Of Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid On Earth*, written and drawn by Chris Ware, appeared with very little fanfare around 2000, and was feted by literary critics even before it had had a chance to make any real impact within comics circles. *Jimmy Corrigan* shares a lot in common with *Maus* - it too is a partly autobiographical tale focusing on the relationship between a man and his father, told in a traditionally cartoonish style. Ware hides his own story behind the character of Jimmy Corrigan, an inherently sad middle-aged man who is contacted by his previously-unknown father, and struggles to form any sort of an emotional bond with a man who he has nothing in common with, and who suddenly dies before any satisfactory conclusion can be drawn between them. It is an achingly sad book, albeit one with a mildly uplifting ending. The bright colours (amusingly described by Tom Paulin as "dreadful… like looking at a bottle of Domestos or Harpic or Ajax"[3]) and lengthy dream sequences and flashbacks disguise the fact that it is a quite simple human story at heart. Like *Maus*, Ware's book has won literary prizes, and has once again brought comics into the review sections of the broadsheets.

[3] Tom Paulin, BBC *Newsnight*, December 8th, 2001

However, the level of acceptance by literary critics cannot be the only measure of whether or not comics are worthy of consideration as literature. If this were the case, comics would be a lot further from such consideration, as examples such as *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Maus* are firmly the exception rather than the rule. I intend now to explore works that are less well-known outside of the comics field, but that have done much in the last quarter of a century to raise the level of literary achievement in the medium.

Many would argue that another aspect of form that holds back the literary growth of comics is the fact that most comics are published in a serialised format of short (usually 22-page) issues, on a monthly bases. I would challenge this on two points - first, and more simply, by drawing a comparison with the works of Charles Dickens, whose works include some of the greatest novels the English language has seen, yet were almost exclusively published originally in serialised form. My second rebuke to this argument draws on a particular example from the field - Alan Moore's *V For Vendetta*. One of the greatest achievements of the medium, the book holds together as an entire novel in its collected form, yet was originally published - and written - over the course of ten years in various British comic magazines. *V* is, in simplified terms, the comics world's *1984*. A remarkable work, it is set in a future Britain ruled by a fascist state. It shows near-unprecedented depth in the quality of writing and character development, and the political satire throughout that admittedly sometimes borders on preaching on the part of Moore. Good satire is so rare within comics that when it does appear it is to be applauded, even when the reader does not necessarily agree with the political views of the writer, although in this case the anarchist views of the book's protagonist, "V", are what drives the story.

There are also a number of other books that were originally published in serialised form, including *Jimmy Corrigan* and *Maus*. The idea that a comic has to be a self-contained graphic novel before it can be considered literature, therefore, is one that holds little water. Indeed, the term "graphic novel" is highly contentious anyway. Many of the works that are held as the greatest the medium has seen are often described as graphic

novels, despite actually being "trade paperback" collections of stories originally published in monthly comics. Will Eisner's *A Contract With God*, meanwhile, is generally considered to be the first graphic novel - yet is actually a collection of four starkly human tenement stories. It is very rare for a comic to initially be published in trade paperback form, and so we must perhaps be more lax in our definition of the phrase "graphic novel", and allow for such works as *Watchmen* and the *Sandman* series to be considered as such, particularly when they represent the highest literary achievement that comics have to offer.

The idea of the graphic novel is actually one of the factors that has aided the literary growth of comics immensely. Comics are no longer confined to specialist shops, nor solely published in a format designed to disintegrate within a matter of years if not kept in vacuum-sealed bags. The expansion of the comic book into the bookshop, in trade paperback form, has enabled comics to be seen as *books* rather than cheap *magazines*. Easily the highest-selling section of this format, and the work that has perhaps garnered more readers from outside of the field than any other, is Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Published in ten books, from an original series of seventy-six monthly issues, *Sandman* represents the peak of literary achievement in comics to date. Gaiman would be the first to acknowledge that his ability to exploit the medium, while strong, is not at the level of someone like Moore, but he is almost certainly the most gifted storyteller that comics have to offer. His books are filled with literary, historical and theological references, and he has an immense ability to write deeply touching, human stories whether in a fantastical setting (as with *Sandman*) or in the real-world (evidenced by his early work, *Violent Cases*). He is also one of the first comics writers to have considerable success outside the medium, becoming a New York Times bestselling author with his third novel *American Gods*.

To demonstrate the level of literary awareness present in *Sandman*, there are a number of books that I could look at in detail. The fourth book, *Season of Mists*, is heavily inspired by *Paradise Lost*, featuring as its central conceit the idea of a very Miltonian Lucifer making the decision to abandon Hell. The penultimate book, *The*

Kindly Ones, meanwhile, takes John Webster as its cue to tell a tale in which the series' central character Morpheus, the personification of Dreaming, is hounded and eventually destroyed by the Furies. Quotes from, and references to, Webster's work are littered throughout, and, as was the case for much of the duration of *Sandman*'s run, the maturity of the writing and the depth of references continually set new benchmarks for comic book storytelling.

However, it is the single issue *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the first monthly comic to win a literary award (admittedly only a World Fantasy Award, but an award usually only given to prose nevertheless), that stands out as showing how comics are capable of intelligent, grown-up stories rooted in the traditions of classic literature. Gaiman takes a bold step in crafting a story around William Shakespeare himself, and the idea that his two dream plays (the play of the title, and *The Tempest*) were written and performed as part of a deal between Shakespeare and Morpheus, and that the initial performance was in front of a collection of "Faeries" upon whom the play is unwittingly based. This is not just an excuse for a few cheap gags about Shakespeare, however, but a thoughtful examination of the man, his life, and particularly his relationship with his son Hamnet. It also represents (along with its sister issue, the final issue of the series, unsurprisingly titled *The Tempest*) perhaps the only time in comic book history where the words of Shakespeare have been so extensively reproduced, leading to the credit "Written by Neil Gaiman, with additional material taken from the play by William Shakespeare."[4] It is in *The Tempest*, meanwhile, that Gaiman uses Shakespeare himself to muse about the role of a writer :

> "Whatever happened to me in my life, happened to me as a writer of plays. I'd fall in love, or fall in lust. And at the height of my passion, I would think, 'So this is how it feels,' and I would tie it up in pretty words… and Prospero and Miranda, Caliban and Gonzalo, aethereal Ariel and silent Antonio, all of them are more real to me than silly, wise Ben Jonson;

[4] N.Gaiman, C.Vess, *The Sandman #19 : "A Midsummer Night's Dream"* (DC Comics, 1990), p.5

> Susanna and Judith; the good citizens of Stratford; the whores and oyster-women of London town…"[5]

Gaiman writes some of the most beautiful, lyrical dialogue ever seen in comics, and brings a poetic quality to his work that is rarely seen elsewhere in the field. It is not just literary references, from Milton to Webster, and from Chesterton to Marlowe and Shakespeare, that he drops into *Sandman*, but moving poetry and prose of his own as well. The following is among the most powerful pieces of dialogue in *The Kindly Ones* :

> "Love takes hostages. It gets inside you. It eats you out and leaves you crying in the darkness, so a simple phrase… turns into a glass splinter working its way into your heart"[6]

His characterisation, too, is one of his greatest strengths. Whether a personification of Dream as old as time itself, the Queen of a mystical land, the Norse god of mischief or a man six-hundred years old simply because "I haven't died yet", each and every one of his characters speaks with its own distinctive voice. Yet Gaiman is not merely capable of such work when inhabiting his own fantasy world - he demonstrates the ability shown by Spiegelman and Ware to tell realistic, human stories in comics with one of his earliest works, *Violent Cases*. The level of sophistication in what is a relatively simple tale about time, memory and Al Capone's osteopath was groundbreaking for the late 1980s comics world in which the book was originally published. As with *Maus* and *Jimmy Corrigan*, the strength in the writing of *Violent Cases* - a wonderful title arising from a child's misconception that "Gangsters had tommy guns, which they kept in violent cases"[7] - is that first and foremost it is a book about people, not about events. It is touching, and it is humane - and, sadly, it seems to have arrived just a touch to early to catch the literary plaudits that greeted the work of Spiegelman and Ware.

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[5] Gaiman, M.Zulli, *The Sandman Book X : The Wake* (DC/Titan, 1996), p.180
[6] Gaiman, M.Hempel, *Sandman #65* (DC/Vertigo, 1995), p.8
[7] Gaiman, D. McKean, *Violent Cases* (Dark Horse, 2003), p.15

Gaiman is perhaps the most well-read writer working in comics today, anecdotal evidence telling us that "when he was old enough to visit his local children's library, he quickly devoured the entire collection. He then turned his attention to the adult stacks, starting at A and working his way through the volumes alphabetically"[8]. While writing comics takes up a smaller part of his time now, due to his success as a novelist and bourgeoning career as a screenwriter, he is nevertheless a valuable commodity in the comics industry - someone who will always bring a sense of literary gravitas to anything he turns his hand to. In years to come, if comics do gain the level of respect as literature that I am arguing that they deserve, *Sandman* will surely be highlighted as one of the first works that proved that comics really can be true adult literature.

It would seem that, amid all the talk of comics as literature, the much-maligned superhero genre is conspicuous by its absence. Such a large percentage of the comics created over the last fifty years are superhero titles that many creators feel that the only way of breaking out and being seen as "mature", or even "literary", is to move away from the genre entirely. However, this is not to suggest that there are not intelligent, thoughtful, mature superhero comics out there. Writing a comic that redefines the boundaries of superhero storytelling is not an easy task, when there are such conventions that have been followed for half a century, but there are a handful of writers who have such a deep understanding of superhero mythology that they are able to do something truly different. The two that stand at the forefront are the ubiquitous Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison.

I have briefly discussed Moore's work already, but it is worth dwelling further on *Watchmen*, the twelve-part graphic novel that is seen by most aficionados as the greatest comic book ever written. Moore was among the first creators to write truly gritty and realistic superhero stories, first with his run on the British character *Miracleman*, and then on *Watchmen*, although he now regrets that these series started a trend in comics :

[8] Bender, *The Sandman Companion*, p.12

> "What I'd seen *Watchmen* as being was something radically different that was taking lots of chances and trying to do something that had never been done before. So the idea of people doing things that were like *Watchmen* was a contradiction in terms… I kind of hoped that… people would have looked at it and not said, 'Oh wow, we can do super-heroes but more violent and with more sex and swearing,' [but] 'Hey, there's interesting storytelling techniques… that maybe we could adapt, or change a bit, or come up with some new ones."[9]

Nevertheless, *Watchmen* is a groundbreaking book, presenting costumed heroes in a "real world" context, and exploring the psychology of those individuals that choose to fight crime in colourful outfits, as well as crafting a remarkable and intelligent storyline filled with twists. The real achievement of *Watchmen*, however, is more in an artistic sense than a literary one - the book contains some of the most innovative uses of the storytelling techniques I discussed earlier. Moore is very keen to exploit the idea that one of comics' greatest strengths is that stories need not be linear, and that by allowing senses and imagery to pervade into the reader's mind, the story can by made coherent by our own mind's process of thought, rather than having everything laid out clearly in front of us. *Watchmen* is superbly written, but is very firmly more a great comic book work than a great literary work.

Grant Morrison, meanwhile, is the only writer of those that I have mentioned who still works on a day-to-day basis in the field of "mainstream" superhero comics. Morrison, unlike the young bookworm Gaiman, grew up reading comics first and foremost, and began work on British comics at an early age. This has given him a sense, perhaps more than any other writer bar Moore, of the true meaning behind the mythology of the superhero, and while Moore turned the superhero into a viable subject for adult stories with his 1980s work, it is Morrison who later brought such ideas right into the comics mainstream. His most noted work to date is his run on *Animal Man*, beginning in 1989 and lasting 26 months, in which he performed the trick beloved of up-and-coming

[9] G.Khoury, *The Extraordinary Works Of Alan Moore* (TwoMorrows, 2003), p.120

British writers by finding an old, third-rate character and using said character to craft stories that shattered preconceptions of what mainstream comics should be all about. While Moore brought superheroes into the real world, and Gaiman brought literature into comics, Morrison's legacy was to turn a simple superhero book into the most post modern, self-referential, deconstructive work ever to hit comics. Morrison is perhaps the master of the monthly multi-part story arc, placing hints and clues early on in his stroylines that encourage re-reading when the end is reached (and which, therefore, strengthen the series' potential as collected books), and he took this to its extreme with *Animal Man*, carefully leading readers to his final issue, #26, in which Animal Man finally learned that his life had been a comic book all along - and in which Morrison himself appeared, explaining everything to the protagonist. Littered with witty references to Morrison's other work and the comics world as a whole, the issue is a classic example of taking a book in a lateral direction, constantly challenging the reader.

In *Animal Man*, Morrison plays on the constant mutability of comics characters and scenarios by explaining that another writer could come along next month and completely change the set up of the book, and this is an idea that is worth considering with regards to characters such as Superman and Batman. Much about the lives of these characters has changed, and been undone and re-done, over the years, but the core tenets and iconography of the characters remain. Indeed, the idea of superheroes as mythology, with their positions as icons more important than the stories in which they appear, is something that is becoming increasingly discussed, and there are many who feel that the most important role of the superhero is not as a literary character but as a modern form of particularly American mythology. Morrison takes this one step further, likening Superman to a modern-day Christ figure. There is much to be said on this matter, but it is an entirely separate discussion that would take longer than space here allows. Certainly, however, it challenges the idea that superhero comics are meaningless, and while there are few traditional superhero books that could ever be considered as true "literature", it is clear that they have an important role to play in our culture, as some of the most recognisable figures of the twentieth century.

Morrison's work is not always the most highbrow, and does not feature the sort of literary aspirations we see in *Sandman*, but he brings intelligence and depth to a genre that has for too long suffered from its own preconceptions - the idea that superhero comics need to be overly simplistic fare aimed at teenage boys. His work on less conventional titles such as *The Invisibles*, meanwhile, further marks him out as one of the top writers in the field, and while he is far more of a comics man than a literature man at heart, he is one of a number of writers whose work should be at the forefront of any discussion about comics as literature.

Interestingly, while Alan Moore is considered one of the writers who have done the most to shape comics into a literary form, he himself is a man highly disillusioned with the comics industry, and also seems surprisingly dismissive of comics as a whole, and their claim to being "literature", in discussion of his most recent success, *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Moore has always pushed back the boundaries of what can be done with traditional superhero concepts, and *LOEG* is no different, a fabulously high-concept series that brings together numerous characters from Victorian literature - Jekyll and Hyde, Captain Nemo, Allan Quatermain, Mina Harker and the Invisible Man - turning them into a sort of Victorian superhero team, under the guidance of Sherlock Holmes' brother Mycroft. In the hands of a lesser writer, such a concept might be wasted, but Moore and artist Kevin O'Neill have crafted two startling and intelligent six-issue volumes around it. Yet he does not see its main success as being a work that has again pushed comics closer to literary acceptance, but that it has done much to drive comics readers *away* from the medium and back to books :

> "... what was best of all [were] letters where people wrote in saying that 'Yes, I'm a 13-year-old kid and I've just gone out and read *King Solomon's Mines* and *Dracula*.' [...] So that's good, the idea that you can use a comic to make people interested in books again, which, considering the incredible wealth of wonderful material that exists in books, and considering how little wonderful material exists in comics, it's probably

doing the readers a service if it can get them interested in these incredible worlds of wonder again..."[10]

While Moore is right that the positive influence of *LOEG* in turning younger comics readers onto books can only be a good thing, I would hope I have shown that he is underselling the medium somewhat when he says that "little wonderful material exists in comics". Yet Moore, although he has never had the same sort of success with his novels as Gaiman has, is clearly keen on prose, as many of his works, including *Watchmen* and *LOEG*, contain lengthy prose inserts that, while not essential reading to understand the comic, certainly enhance reading immeasurably.

There is a long way to go before comics can gain true literary acceptance, and arguably there is no single comics work yet that truly "defines" the medium and indelibly pervades the mass consciousness. However, great steps have been taken in the last quarter of a century to exploit the true possibilities of the medium and craft work that can be taken on its own terms as great art and literature, and as I have shown, there is not adequate justification for dismissing comics purely on the basis of their form. With literary circles paying ever-closer attention to the higher end of the work in the field, it can only be a matter of time before the question of whether or not comics should be considered literature becomes more than just speculation. Certainly, however, it is clear that comics have a lot more to offer than simply brightly-coloured superheroes and the words "ZAP!" and "KAPOW!"

[10] Khoury, *Alan Moore*, p.183

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