American Masculinity in Contemporary Adult Comics

by

Mark C. Hill

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
May 9, 2010

Keywords: comics, masculinity, popular culture

Approved by

James Ryan, Chair, Associate Professor of English
Mark Silverstein, Professor of English
Sunni Stalter, Assistant Professor of English

Abstract

The connections between American comics and American men have been an interest to the academy since Frederic Wertham's attack on comic's influence on American youth in 1954. This study examines the current trends in masculine identity in American comics, specifically three widely popular and critically acclaimed comics from Vertigo , the adult-oriented subsidiary of DC Comics. Within *Fables*, *Preacher*, and *Y: the Last Man* are a battleground between dominant and emergent forms of masculine identity, with heroes ranging from the traditional, patriarchal hypermasculine to a new, "geeky," aesthetic.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

"The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."

- Michel Foucault[1]

In his 1967 definition of heterotopic spaces, Michel Foucault argues prophetically that space, as a concept, will outweigh history as our primary concern. Any search of an academic search engine, or even just Google, will reveal the preoccupation with architectural, transnational, literary, racialized, or gendered spaces and a desire to locate a mapping framework suitable for discussing viable theoretical constructs like identity formation. Foucault cites the cinema as a site of juxtaposition of space, as a two-dimensional moving image that presents the illusion of three-dimensional existence, but I believe his example would have been better suited to another medium: comics. Comics create a three-dimensional existence without the illusion of movement readily available for films; instead, they juxtapose "in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[2] A comics page, traditionally a collection of six rectangular panels, combines a visual space (the page) with imagined ones (the "off panel" space hinted at by the artist, the blank space between panels where the reader imagines movement in time and space) to create the illusion of motion that film and television

---

[1] Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 22.

[2] Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

can create through moving images. In recent decades, American and British theorists have joined the already rich French and Belgian traditions of comics scholarship in order to better understand both the history and creation, as well as the processes of creation within, comics. This project asserts that the "space" of comics books, as many of these scholars have mentioned, is one rife with potential for the exploration of meaning and identity. In particular, it explores how in these spaces, contemporary comics become sites for more complicated gender inscriptions than seen in previous epochs of comics, and although conservative, hypermasculine ideals are still supported, especially in the more well known superhero genre (Batman, Superman, Wolverine), there are spaces that sustain a greater array of gender performances.

This study approaches comics through their contemporary practices in order to understand the production of culture in a popular media style. Specifically, I am interested in the production of American ideas of masculinity as constructed in comic books during the turn of the millennia. It is originally through happenstance that the works chosen were all comics associated with DC's Vertigo Press, its mature imprint created in 1992. Comics in particular whose masculine productions beg analysis are both *Preacher* (1995-200), a comic with a hypermasculine Texan lead character struggling with "old fashioned" gender expectations while also forming a relationship with a powerful, aggressive woman, and *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008), a comic about the only man to escape a plague that simultaneously destroyed every male of every species. In addition to these two, I decided upon Bill Willingham's *Fables* (2002-present day)*,* which recasts fairy tale heroes and heroines in a modern United States, keeping in mind both their historical constructions and their Disneyfied incarnations, and specifically creates a hero with a Hollywood-esque masculinity.   While these comics are hardly, as

discussed above, demonstrative of the entirety of comics available in the last ten years, they remain emblematic icons of a medium that has infiltrated every aspect of American mass media.

The crossroads of masculinity and comic book characters is hardly untouched by scholars, although to date it is the major superhero productions of DC and Marvel (specifically, Superman and Batman) that have received the most intense scrutiny.[3] It is my aim to connect the contemporary moment to the tradition of literary and social criticism that has demonstrated that comics are an iconic site of production for American masculinity. Specifically, I will examine masculine productions as a performance, heavily drawing upon the work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick for grounding.[4] As I am concerned with the construction of a national ideal, Homi K. Bhabha's and Benedict Anderson's work on nation building is essential to my underlying definitions of community structures.[5] Similarly, my approach to film studies has been heavily influenced by media critics like Douglas Kellner and Herbert Schiller, who both highlight popular media's power of enforcing dominant ideology, as well as Peter Lehman, who lies at the nexus of film and masculinity studies.[6] In addition to the key theorists mentioned above, I am particularly indebted to Richard Slotkin's three volume examination of American masculinity from the inception of the country to the early 1990s.

Before I can examine alterations in the traditional structure of comics, it is essential that I discuss both the history of comics and the way comics are structured. In my first chapter, I will outline the creation of the modern American comic from its beginnings as European story-

---

[3] Notable examples that have examined masculinity in comics are Brown, *Black Superheroes*, 167-188 and Clarkson, "Virtual Heroes," 175-185.

[4] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and Sedgwick *Epistemology of the Closet*.

[5] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

[6] Kellner, *Media Culture*, Schiller, *Mass Communications*, and Lehman, *Running Scared* and *Masculinity*.

paintings by Rodolphe Töpffer. The history of American comics is frequently the history of "low culture," and its struggle for legitimacy follows similar paths as the other 20th century art form – the film – even if comics are a few decades late in receiving due critical attention outside of a cultural study. The purpose of the second chapter is to trace the critical attention that comics has received, in order to provide a theoretical map for a burgeoning comics studies. Until the last decade, most examinations into comics structure has been formalist – performed mostly by French and Swedish researchers. In chapter two, I will start with these formalist theories, but also branch out into a description of the forefront of comics studies – most frequently found in American and British cultural studies programs.

The third chapter of this manuscript examines Bill Willingham's *Fables*, a comic that incorporates elements of European and Arabic fairytales and folklore into contemporary America. Willingham, like Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, and countless others before him, has reshaped these iconic figures with his own reinterpretations that interrogate and complicate their traditional representations, many of whom reflect political and social issues of the present era. Specifically, it is the character of Bigby Wolf, Willingham's version of the Big Bad Wolf of European fairytales, who is at the center of both the ongoing *Fables* narrative and my examination of the comic. Bigby's character provides numerous inroads from which to understand the current cultural production of a country at war, and it is the ties between his heroic portrayal and the complex discourses of masculine identity, specifically for men at war, that I find particularly illuminating. Bigby's masculinity is in constant negotiation with a hybridity of older engendering narratives, from the mythical hero soldier of World War II to the cowboy/outlaw hero at war with a capitalist oppressor, to name only a few. As a lover of *Fables*, I am disturbed by the stiflingly rigid masculinity that is privileged within the text, but am not

surprised that such a nostalgic, hypermasculine ideal as found in the propaganda narratives of World War II is evidenced during a time of growing national conservatism. In this vein, *Fables* serves as an important crossroads of genres, which only begins with revisionist fairy tales and comic books that map the incorporation, resistance, or continuation of hegemonic processes in American masculinity.

Like Bigby Wolf, Jesse Custer, the protagonist of Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's, is filled with traditional notions of hyperaggressive masculinity. *Preacher* is often cited as an over-the-top, irreverent examination of the American South, filled with guns, violence, inbred cousins, and John Wayne. While this is an appropriate description of the ultra-violent, machismo-driven comic, it was not created by Americans: the writer Garth Ennis is Irish and the artist Steve Dillon is British. Their nationality, according to my analysis, is essential in the creation of their protagonist Jesse Custer, a preacher who has been possessed by Genesis, an infant born of an angel and a demon created of pure goodness and evil. According to the comic, Genesis infuses Custer with the power to rival God, which the preacher uses to track down God, who has gone into hiding with the birth of a power equal to his own, to make him answer for the state of the world. Custer, raised on stories of a war hero father and the movies of John Wayne (the latter of which appears to him as a guiding force or conscience), is an American cowboy stereotype, heavily laden with the growing conservative masculinity found in the Reagan-era[7] – he drinks liquor, carries guns, possesses undying loyalty to his friends and lover, and carries his daddy's Zippo lighter engraved with "Fuck Communism."[8] In many ways, he is a caricature of American masculinity, and his lover, Tulip O'Hare, is a caricature of aggressive feminism who

---

[7] Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 24-63.

[8] The same lighter is owned by Yorick Brown in *Y: the Last Man*, and states that he got the idea from "some comic" when asked about it.

shares more in common with Custer than with a character like *Shane*'s Marian Starrett. Ennis and Dillon overcharge the hyper-masculine American ideal and place it in opposition to an Irish stereotype, Custer's best friend, Cassidy, a heavy-drinking, down-at-the-heels vampire. It is the interplay between these three characters as they wrestle with gendered performance in their various relationships, but, more importantly, their characterization by non-Americans that is at the center of the chapter.

Whereas the protagonists of both *Fables* and *Preacher* are forcefully hyper-masculine, the last living male human on earth in Brian K. Vaughn's *Y: the Last Man* is more anxious than aggressive. Yorick Brown, a name invoking *Hamlet* with both the folly of the Shakespearean jester and the insecurity of the play's protagonist, is an unemployed English major and amateur escape artist. Awkward and uncertain, Yorick is surrounded by powerful woman figures – his mother Jennifer Brown is a Congressional Representative from Ohio, his sister Hero Brown graduated from Sarah Lawrence and is a paramedic, and his girlfriend Beth Deville is an anthropologist working in Australia. When the plague hits, instantly destroying every other man on earth, Yorick spends a majority of the comic struggling to reach Beth, and showcases the aftermath of a world after men. One of the dangers of this narrative is the possibility of Yorick "learning" to become more aggressive, while the women around him slowly develop into submissive counterparts, but *Y: the Last Man* does not fall to such simple role reversal. Yorick does become more self-possessed and confident, but he does not leave all of the awkward and clumsy traits behind, and the women of the comic, while experiencing moments of emotional weakness during a time of tragedy, do not become weak themselves. Gender portrayal within *Y: the Last Man* complicates traditional conservative masculinity that is dominant in the American

comics medium, especially as found in the superhero comics, and demonstrates a growing acceptance of alternative masculine productions.

Through an examination of these comics, whose publication span 15 years, there is an example of both traditional notions of masculine productions and attempts to alter those conservative views. The American comics medium, as described in chapter one, expresses conservative values, and although there are moments of radical expression (the comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s, for example), mainstream comics tend towards hulking, hypermasculine demigods who support heteronormative, aggressive masculine heroes with simpering, victimized female supporting characters. The past twenty years, however, has seen breaks from these traditional standards into alternative forms of masculine (and feminine) portrayal. My conclusion will draw connections between *Fables*, *Preacher*, and *Y: the Last Man*, as dominant, resistant, and emergent masculine norms, as well as briefly describe the contemporary comics landscape – with its vast and varied genres and gendered portrayals.

Chapter 1: The Emergence of Comics

While the comic book medium has been relatively well defined, there remains a debate on the origination of sequential art and its influences on contemporary comic art.[1] In cataloguing earlier sequential art, comic book historians tend to start with the European, mostly French and Spanish, cave paintings dated to between 10,000-25,000 years ago, followed by a brief mention of a handful of pre-Victorian era moments of sequential art history (Grecian urns, Egyptian hieroglyphs, or the French Bayeux Tapestry, to name a few of the more prominent examples), then jump to either William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, or if slightly more well informed, the work of the Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer. In an attempt to appear comprehensive, comic book historians tend to gloss over the lack of coherent connections between these widely disparate time periods and contemporary comics, and ultimately marginalize the medium in an "attempt to protect…comic book scholarship by hiding it amongst its more respectable cousins."[2] Rather than mask the origins of the comic book in an unexamined alliance with historic sequential art pieces, it is best to start in the earliest documented period of printed comics.

In 1831, Töppfer published *Histoire de M. Jabot*, a collection of what he called picture-stories, entertaining combinations of drawings and dialogue. His strongest contribution to comic

---

[1] Sequential art is defined, most famously, by Wil Eisner as "a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea." Eisner, *Sequential Art*, xi. Eisner's definition has come under attack by comics theorists, as described latter in this chapter, but serves as a good working definition to begin a discussion.

[2] Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 3. While this specific quote refers to the practice of comic book scholars attempting to elevate their subject by aligning comic books with the more respected comic strip art form, Duncan and Smith similarly acknowledge that connecting comic books to these historic pieces of art is a strategic attempt to increase the former's respectability in both the artistic and academic communities.

art is the invention of panels, lines that separate the individual drawings into sections and drive the sequential process. In a famous anecdote, Töppfer was unable to see well enough to continue with his love of painting, so switched to drawing as an artistic substitute. In 1845 he wrote *Essai de Physiognomonie*, the first defense of the comic form, but (in another famous historical footnote) his work would have been lost if it were not for the interest of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose good opinion of T*ö*ppfer ensured his continued publication.[3] An English translation of his *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* made its way into the American press in 1842 as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, and is occasionally cited as the first American comic book. Shirrel Rhoades, a former executive vice president of Marvel Entertainment, disagrees in his *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, arguing that the formatting of the translation did not "resemble today's comic book in size or presentation."[4] This alteration would not occur until 1933, decades after comic strips became the major comic medium in the United States.

There is a long history of illustration in American print, from the sketches of historic figures like Benjamin Franklin and Paul Revere to the American illustrated humor magazines of the mid 1800s.[5] What we commonly consider mainstream comics, however, did not arrive until the last few decades of the 19th Century. In 1883, Joseph Pulitzer purchased the *New York World*, a newspaper that would be at the forefront of American comics history until the 20th century. It regularly included editorial cartoons throughout the 1880s and, in 1893, ran the first full color page. By 1896, color had been applied to regular comic strips and influenced the moniker for the first famous comic strip character "The Yellow Kid," a creation of Richard

---

[3] Goethe, *Conversations with Goethe*, 350.

[4] Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books*, 3.

[5] For more information on the connection between this era of illustrated American publications, including the first illustrated humor magazines like *Puck*, see Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture*, 13-24.

Felton Outcault from a strip that would eventually be called "Hogan's Alley." Outcault filed for a copyright for his character and was denied, which launched an industry of unlicensed Yellow Kid merchandise across the country. Both Pulitzer and his biggest competitor, William Randolph Hearst, started a bidding war for publishing rights for the Yellow Kid, and thus began the murky financial dealings that have been as much a part of comic book history as superheroes.

Over the next forty years, the comic industry exploded with thousands of characters and strips, and with just as many books full of reprints. One of the many companies that published these reprintings was Eastern Color Printing Company, which would eventually become Dell Publishing. In 1929 it began publishing a tabloid collection called *The Funnies*, but it was not until M. C. Gaines and Harry I. Wildenburg published *Funnies on Parade* in 1933 to assist with a Proctor & Gamble advertisement campaign that the contemporary American comic book format was created (through the simple process of bending the tabloid in half to create more pages). After witnessing the success of the advertisement campaign, Gaines released *Famous Funnies* on the newspaper stands – instantly creating a marketable hit. In 1934, he began publishing *Funnies on Parade* bi-monthly, and before the end of the year, other publishing houses began their own comic page reprints for the newsstands.

While Gaines is credited for initiating the American comic book franchise, it was retired cavalry officer, Major Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson, who first began to publish original material in comic book form. In early 1935, his company National Allied Publications released *New Fun Comics*, which was filled with pulp material similar to popular comic strips like *Flash Gordon* and *Tarzan*. *New Fun* was not an instant success, and Wheeler Nicholson fell into debt to Harry Donenfield's Independent News. The two businessmen, with Donenfield's partner Jack Leibowitz, formed Detective Comics, Inc. and released *Detective Comics* in 1937. Shortly after

this publication, Donenfield and Leibowitz bought out Wheeler Nicholson, and the two companies merged. Although the new venture was initially called National Comics, it was more commonly known as DC Comics. DC Comics continued to publish *New Fun* and *Detective Comics*, but it was not until their 1938 release *Action Comics* that the company began to see highly increased revenue. This financial boon could be entirely credited to two of their employees, writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, and their latest creation -- Superman. The character was not an overnight success, but Donenfield learned after a few months that children were looking for the comic which featured Superman at their newsstands. He increased the number of Superman stories in *Action Comics*, and by 1940, the character had his own self-titled, bi-monthly release that grossed nearly 1 million dollars that year.[6] Superman is the founding character of the superhero genre, and his success led to hundreds of other superhero comics over the next seven years during a time that has been (all but universally) labeled the Golden Age of Comics.[7]

During this era, DC produced several of the icons who remain their hallmark characters today, characters like Batman (*Detective Comics* #27 in 1939), Wonder Woman (*All Star Comics* #8 in 1941), and the Green Lantern (*All-American Comics* #16 in 1940). Numerous other publishers began their own lines featuring characters with fantastic powers, like Quality Comics' Plastic Man (*Police Comics* #1 in 1941) and Fawcett's Captain Marvel (*Whiz Comics* #2 in

---

[6] Goulart, *Over Fifty Years of American Comic Books*, 78-83.

[7] Unfortunately, the Golden Age is about the only commonly agreed upon era in the history of comics. There are some historians who move away from this structure, who concentrates on the depiction of superhero types, labeling the eras as First, Second, or Third Heroic. I find this labeling system too restrictive, however, as it tends to ignore the plethora of contemporary comics without any form of heroic structure. As most adhere to the metallic standard, I will use these more traditional terms to describe movements in comics history.

1940)[8], in an attempt to cash in on the superhero comic craze.   In the late 1930s, Martin

Goodman decided to produce superhero comics after his pulp magazines began to fail and started

up numerous publishing houses like Atlas Comics and Timely Comics, which would recombine

as one company in the 1950s – and rename itself Marvel Comics in 1961. In 1939, Goodman

began using the talents of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and released *Marvel Comics* #1, containing

the first of the companies' (and Simon and Kirby's) long list of famous superheroes, the Human

Torch and Namor the Sub-Mariner. These two particular characters, who were connected to the

competing elements of fire and water, were the first to "crossover" into each other's comics,

establishing a unified comic world and led the way for companies to start a single continuity

amongst its collective comics, an approach that DC eventually adopted.

The Golden Age continued through World War II, into the middle of the 1950s, and saw

the creation of dozens of names, like Marvel's Captain American and Iron Man, that continue to

sell comics, movies, and merchandise more than 50 years since their creation. The superhero

comic, however, was not the only genre to cross over into this new publication medium.   By the

end of the World War II, an entire range of romances, Westerns, crime dramas, war stories, and

comedies flooded newsstands, including the iconic *Archie*, but of all of these the best selling in

the decade after World War II was the horror comic. Although the earliest known horror comic

is *Eerie* in 1946, horror themed comics did not become a market force until 1950 with the release

of the titles *Haunt of Fear, Vault of Horror*, and *Crypt of Terror*, the latter of which was retitled

at issue #20 as *Tales from the Crypt*, all published by William M. Gaines' Entertaining Comics

(EC). With its gruesome art, twist endings, and tendency towards inside jokes for long-term

---

[8] Captain Marvel was one of the best selling characters of the mid 1940s, and outsold Superman during his peak, but Fawcett ceased publication in 1953 after a successful copyright infringement lawsuit by DC.

readers, the horror genre quickly dominated the market, selling more than 20 million comics a month in 1954.[9]

Its aggressivly morbid subject matter, however, came under attack, as did most of the other genres of comics, including superheroes, in 1954 with the publication of the infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* by German-born psychologist Fredric Wertham. He accused horror comics of propagating increased levels of violence in its readership and accused several superhero comics of "sexual deviancy" – labeling Batman, Robin, and Wonder Woman as homosexual. While Wertham has since been debunked for his lack of evidence and poor research design, his inflammatory study created a whirlwind of negative media coverage that shocked parents and raised national concern for children's welfare. Wertham became a short-lived media icon, and his statements brought the comic book industry, especially EC's line of horror comics, before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. The comic industry was found not to be the cause of violence, but the subcommittee's recommendation that it tone down its content led several publishers to create the Comics Code Authority. The CCA was a voluntary organization that examined comics for unwholesome activity, and if the comics met their standards, which included, among other rules, not using the words horror or terror, having no criminal characters shown sympathetically, having no government officials portrayed disrespectfully, and ensuring that "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds," was given their Seal of Approval.[10]

Before the Code's implementation, the comics industry was encountering a gradual slump in sales (with the lone exception of the horror genre), and with the Code's restrictions, comic books rapidly lost market value. Many publishers over the next two decades simply

---

[9] The Press, *Time*, May 3, 1954.
[10] Nyberg, *Seal of Approval,* 166-169.

vanished, while others, like E. C.'s *Mad*, a satiric parody of social and popular culture, escaped the comic medium altogether by altering their format to be labeled a magazine. In an attempt to save sales, the few successful comic publishers returned to superheroes as their mainstay icons, as their feats of daring fell well within the boundaries of the restrictive Code. While George Reeves had revitalized the Superman brand name on television, the comics industry turned back to the characters of the Golden Age, as first found in DC's revision (or reboot, to use a modern phrase) of the Flash in *Showcase* #4 in 1956. Over the next decade, other Golden Age heroes returned with altered histories and new stories, revitalizing the comics industry and beginning the Silver Age of comics. While DC was busy reinventing heroes like Hawkman, Marvel had turned to monster-themed comics like *Strange Worlds* and *Tales to Astonish*; however, it did not take them long to rejoin the superhero genre. During the 1960s, Marvel's Editor-in-chief Stan Lee and artists Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and Don Heck (to name a few) worked together to create some of the most well known fictional characters of the 20th century. They started in 1961 with the release of *The Fantastic Four* #1, and the next few years saw the creation of icons like The Incredible Hulk, Dr. Strange, Thor, the X-Men, and Spiderman. By the end of the decade, Marvel's innovative characters (and arguably their greater penchant towards mistakes and human foibles) allowed the company to overtake DC's place as the best selling publisher in comics.

Innovation and sophistication were not only to be found in mainstream superhero comics, but also in the independent press in the form of underground comix.[11] In opposition to the mass market driven conventional comics, with their lengthy history of decisions made solely

---

[11] The alternative spelling of comics has been adapted by comic historians to denote the separation of independent comics, by the likes of Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, with their importance to counterculture of the 1960s and 70s, from their conventional counterparts.

upon profit and owners who cared nothing for their product,[12] the underground movement started with the intent to demonstrate the medium's artistic merit, with an overt dedication to 1960s counterculture. These comics were intended for adult audiences, and in blatant disregard to the CCA, frequently contained sex, drug use, anti-establishment political messages, and criminal activities, and since they were either self-published or distributed through the "underground" press, they were never involved with the consortium of publishers in the CCA. Strongly influenced by *Mad* magazine, these comics provided a place to explore and celebrate the iconoclast message of the era's youth, as well as a platform for artistic expression. Most importantly, while Marvel was demonstrating that it was possible for comic heroes to possess personal conflicts, the underground comix of R. Crumb, Harvey Pekar, and Kim Deitch, to name only a few, revealed that the medium could address adult audiences and themes – the two qualities required for the creation of the graphic novel in the 1970s.[13] Even though they were plagued with the problems of any small publication business, like small print runs and erratic publication schedules, underground comix maintained popularity and moderate monetary success until the early 1980s, when alternative press comics from independent publishers became financially feasible.

This alteration in the market became possible after mainstream publishers struggled throughout the 1970s, as the boom of originality and mass market appeal found in the 1960s slowly halted. In 1969, DC Comics merged with (then) Warner Bros/7 Arts, and with their new funding, lured Kirby from Marvel to create his short-lived, but groundbreaking, *Fourth World,* [14]

---

[12] M. C. Gaines, in particular, is well-known for his distaste for the industry he took over from his father.

[13] For further information about the history of the underground comix movement, see Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions*.

[14] Jack Kirby's *Fourth World* saga only lasted until 1973, as its unusually sophisticated storylines (for comics) did not find critical success. It would take another 13 years, and the publication of Alan Moore's *The Watchman*, before comic book audiences would widely accept, and purchase, complicated comics in a serial format.

but this was a short lived break from tradition, and DC began to mimic Marvel's strategy of releasing dozens of new titles, which, unfortunately, became famous for their questionable quality. Comic historians customarily refer to this period as the Bronze Age, as the quality of the Silver Age comics slowly decreased until the mid 1980s. The 1970's, however, did not lack any noteworthy advancements in mainstream comics; in 1971, the *Amazing Spider-Man* #96-98 highlighted the dangers of drug use, but its content was in blatant disregard to the Comics Code. The success of the three-issue series, coupled with other Marvel and DC heroes' "approved" interactions with social issues like racism and draft dodging, induced the CCA to relax some of their limitations on social commentary. This led to a brief period of social activism, but Paul Lopes argues that over "the long term, the new code led less to the increased social relevancy of comic books than to more graphic, dark, and violent superhero comic books."[15] This was evidenced by the creation of Marvel's Wolverine and the Punisher, two ultra-violent characters that would pave the way for the forthcoming changes in the 1980s, and by the early work of Frank Miller, of *Sin City* fame, on *Daredevil* in 1979.

The most encompassing change of the decade, however, was financial, with the rising importance of licensing and merchandise for the publisher and the switch to a direct distribution system for mainstream comics. The success of the 1960s *Batman* television series, the only comic inspired television series to succeed since George Reeve's *Superman*, led to numerous attempts to bring comics to the little screen, with *Wonder Woman* (1975) and *The Incredible Hulk* (1977) as the most successful. After the release of *Superman* (1978) and *Superman II* (1980) on the big screen, with the former receiving three Academy Award nominations, it was apparent that the comic book industry could support itself on its intellectual property alone.

---

[15] Lopes, *Demanding Respect,* 69.

Ironically, while the characters were becoming big business, comic books themselves were finding a smaller purchasing audience. As fewer businesses were willing to stock comics, they were removed from the shelves of newsstands and drug stores, and the direct market was implemented. Small business owners were willing to purchase directly from the publisher at a discount, but they would lose the right to return unsold merchandise that the newsstands enjoyed. This forced the comic audience to purchase from comic book shops, and in doing so, created a niche market that, until recently, served as one of the few outlets that produced a specific comic book fan culture, as the shop became an important center for fan activity.[16]

The demographics of this fan base had, however, decidedly aged from wide-eyed boys to an adult audience, as evidenced by the successful run of more mature mainstream comics in the last half of the 1970s. Fans were not only prepared for more complex superhero stories, with difficult moral dilemmas, but also to see the comic book as an art form with an unlimited ability of expression, and they were willing to purchase quality comics from any publisher. As early as 1976, with the creation of Fantagraphics Books, independent comic publishers demonstrated an ability to once again turn a profit with small print runs of unique, mature storytelling. In 1980, Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly released *RAW*, a comics anthology that packaged American and European comics, with occasional illustrations, stories, or non-fiction pieces, in the hope of changing comics' reputation as a children's medium. *RAW* #1 contained Spiegelman's first issue of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, which recounted both Spiegelman's troubled relationship with his father Vladek, and Vladek's experiences during the Holocaust that led him from Poland into Auschwitz, with all of the humans in the story anthromorphized into animal substitutes, where Jews were depicted as mice, and Germans as cats, among others.

---

[16] For more information of the development of fan culture through the comic book shop, comic conventions, and elevation of the comic artist as hero, see Lopes, *Demanding Respect*, 91-119.

These separate issues were gathered into two collected editions, the first in 1986 and the second in 1991, and the unified work won the Pulitzer Prize Special Award for Letters in 1992. *RAW* never enjoyed the attention of *Maus*, but the alternative comic press had several successful ventures, with Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* as the most popular. Also released in 1980, *Love and Rockets* is a series of narratives recounting the lives of mostly Chicano or Latin American characters and their interactions with the 1980s punk movement, lesbianism, rebellion in Africa, magical realism, transsexualism, and the Mexican government, to mention only a few of the hundreds of stories created by the Hernandez brothers.

Once the alternative press, with no connection to the Comics Code Authority, demonstrated that they could profit with adult-themed comics, it was not difficult for the mainstream press to realize it needed rejuvenation, and it looked for new talent to liven up poorly selling titles. In 1983, DC brought Alan Moore in to write for their recent reboot of their 1970s horror release *Swamp Thing*, after he had received attention for his inventive approach in the British comics *2000 A.D.* and *Warrior*, where he created the successful character Judge Dread. Moore had already demonstrated that he could effectively invigorate an old character in his 1982 revision of *Marvelman*, a British take on America's Captain Marvel first released in 1954. In Moore's retelling, the main character slowly learns that only he has both the strength and wisdom to end war and suffering on earth, so subjugates the entire planet to force world peace and equality between all humans, sacrificing his own humanity and marriage in the process. Moore brought similar drastic changes to *Swamp Thing*, turning the main character from a once-human creature to the most recent incarnation of a line of mythic gods of the Green, introducing spiritual, ecological, and literary themes into a horror comic – harking back to EC 's horror comics of the 1950s before the introduction of the Comic Code. Coincidentally, *Swamp Thing*

also became the first mainstream comic to abandon the Comic Code Authority, an act which had no impact on its sales.

In further efforts to revitalize lagging sales, publishers turned to releasing limited series comics, ones with defined story arcs and structured, finite runs, in addition to their standard monthly titles. The limited series has been a comic staple since the 1960s, but it was traditionally used to introduce new characters who, if marketable, received their own monthly comic. In the late 1970s, however, DC released increasingly more limited runs to grab reader attention, but the most successful of which were not part of their greater canonical universe. From 1982 through 1984, they published *Camelot 3000*, and in 1983 and 1984, they published Frank Miller's *Ronin*, both touching upon historic heroic archetypes set in dystopic futures. These two marketable titles were the minority, however, as most of the limited series sold poorly and destroyed DC's comic continuity in what is commonly referred to as the "DC Implosion," with nearly 60 comics a month set in the same connected world.   It took another limited series to fix their massive continuity problems; in 1985 they staged *Crisis on Infinite Earths,* a crossover event similar to Marvel's *Secret Wars* that was released a year earlier. Both sets of "maxi-comics" were massive in scope and touched upon all major, and dozens of minor, characters connected to their larger continuity. Whereas for Marvel, *Secret Wars* served as a large scale promotional pitch, for DC, *Infinite Earths* was a way to eliminate scores of characters and bring stability to their fluctuating universe.

It is at this point that comics regained national attention since the implementation of the Comics Code, as the mainstream media latched onto several new adult-themed comics as a sign that comics were "growing up." In 1986, often cited as a watershed moment in the development of the comic as a recognized artistic medium, Spiegelman's *Maus* was released in a more

traditional graphic novel form, and the overnight success of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* grabbed media attention. Peter Coogan cites these latter texts as the beginning of the "superhero renaissance,"[17] whereas Paul Lopes (perhaps more accurately) argues that the press was only finally noticing what had been occurring for over a decade – that there were powerful narratives to be found in the comic medium that addressed complex, mature themes and subject matter. Miller's version of Batman is heralded as returning the character to his darker, vigilante roots, an act mimicked nearly two decades later by director Christopher Nolan's recent film versions that moved away from the outlandish antics of earlier Batman movies like *Batman Forever* and *Batman & Robin*. Set in a dystopic future, *The Dark Knight Returns* features a near-alcoholic Bruce Wayne who, when forced out of retirement, brutally – almost savagely – devastates a gang terrorizing Gotham. In *Watchmen*, the only superhero team in the world is dismantled by the U.S. government after anti-hero protests sweep the nation, led by citizens who are fearful of the heroes' unchecked power. Set years after the riots, *Watchmen* explores the moral choices required by the superpowered, who like the Nietzschian übermensch possess not only a vision for how people should behave, but also the ability to enforce their vision on humanity. Both of these texts question the nature of heroism, and feature characters with unclear moral choices who struggle with problems as realistically as a genre about those with superpowers will allow.

The same year saw the creation of Mike Richardson's Dark Horse Comics, the first independent comic publisher that effectively competed against Marvel and DC for comic audiences since the 1950s. Its first release was *Dark Horse Presents*, a monthly anthology that showcased both new and well-known comic artists and writers, with Paul Chadwick's Eisner Award winning *Concrete* and Frank Miller's *Sin City* as the title's most renowned works. Once

---

[17] Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre,* 1-23.

Dark Horse was established as a viable comic publisher, Richardson used his profits to purchase licensing rights for comic productions of film and television franchises like *Star Wars*, *Aliens*, *Predator*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. While there was a brief attempt in the 1990s to create a unique continuity of superheroes similar to Marvel and DC's publishing model, Dark Horse's success is based in its licensed material, as well as providing a venue for creator-owned series like Miller's *Sin City* and *300*, Mike Mignolia's *Hellboy*, and Michael Chabon's *The Escapist* (the superhero created by the main characters of Chabon's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*).

The events of 1986 led DC to continue pulling talented artists and writers from the United Kingdom, and this move has been labeled by comic historians as the "British Invasion" of American comics. Karen Berger, a DC editor who worked with Alan Moore during his stint on *Swamp Thing*, recruited Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison, Jaime Delano, Dave McKean, and Steve Dillon, among a dozen others, and allowed them free reign to create compelling stories that demonstrated the diverse narratives possible with the comic medium. Morrison's *Animal Man*, a Silver Age character he rebooted in 1988, merged eccentric narrative techniques found in postmodern literature, like breaking the fourth wall and casting doubt on the existence of its own author, with the superhero genre. The same year, Jaime Delano started *Hellblazer*, a horror comic featuring John Constantine, a wise-cracking, unlucky sorcerer/con-artist first created by Alan Moore for *Swamp Thing*, who frequently engages in morally questionable actions, like betraying innocent friends for the greater good. Of all the new titles released under Berger, it was Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* that diverted so radically from DC's traditional narrative, and in so doing, garnered 18 Eisner Awards and a World Fantasy Award for Best Short Fiction. *Sandman* recounts the existence of an anthropomorphic incarnation of dreams, named Morpheus, as he

brushes against humanity and examines the nature of his, and thereby the audience's, existence, mortality, and purpose. Initially set in DC's comic continuity, *Sandman* eventually establishes its own universe, filled with fallen deities and mortals of all moral calibers, where Gaiman explores the horrors of a serial killer convention alongside the wonder of Shakespeare performing *A Midsummer's Night Dream* for the Faerie Queen Titania herself. With the success of these more mature titles, Berger encouraged DC to create its own imprint dedicated to their publication, and in 1993, the newly created Vertigo Press, headed by Berger, launched. By the end of the decade, Vertigo had eclipsed all of DC's other imprints and produced influential and award winning comics like Warren Ellis's *Transmetropolitan,* Morrison's *The Invisibles*, and Garth Ennis' and Steve Dillon's *Preacher.*

While DC was exploring comic venues outside of the superhero genre, both Marvel and DC's traditional comics were also experiencing a period of rapid expansion. In part, this growth was due to new writers and artists gathering their own fanbases, outside of the characters they produced, who would follow their favorite creator from one project to another. It was enough to attach Todd McFarlane or Marc Silvestri's name to a new release to skyrocket the sales of the first issue. In addition to the newfound stardom of comic book creators, there was also a five to six year frenzy of comic book speculation, where audiences were rapidly "investing" in the future value of comics. Several high profile first issues from the Golden Age were reselling for over $80,000, and comic audiences believed their hobby would also take care of their retirement funds. The mainstream publishers, and the new independent publishers encouraged by Dark Horse, indulged them, capitalizing on the speculation craze by releasing multiple-cover first

issues, glossed or embossed special issues, or polybagged issues.[18] This purchasing blitz

continued, until the media-hyped "Death of Superman" story arc in 1992, which sold over 6

million copies. With so many first issues flooding the market, the value of those comics fell

beneath their purchasing price, and the demand for them declined while the publishers, spurred

on by the success of stories like "Death of Superman," continued their massive publishing runs,

and, predictably, the comic book market crashed.

Another blow to mainstream comic publishers was the creation of Image Comics in 1993.

The superstar artists at Marvel, Todd McFarlane, Erik Larsen, Jim Lee, Rob Liefield, Whilce

Portacio, Marc Silvestri, and Jim Valentino, grew tired of Marvel's control over their creative

property and left to found their own publishing brand that would grant full ownership to each

creator. All but Portacio founded a studio attached to Image, and the company began releasing

best selling works like *Spawn*, *Witchblade*, and *The Darkness*. Despite early struggles with late

schedules, criticism for their tendency to elevate art over story, and personality clashes among

the founders, Image demonstrated the ability to compete with Marvel and DC over the long term.

After 1993, Marvel struggled with both bankruptcy and multiple hostile corporate takeovers, but

Image, DC through its Vertigo imprint and incorporation of Jim Lee's *Wildstorm* Studios, and

numerous smaller, independent companies continued to successfully experiment with creator-

controlled titles, expanding the genres available to the comic audience. As for the superhero

genre, all of the major publishers, which now included Image, were receiving criticism for a

continuing focus on style over substance in their mainstream releases, with grossly exaggerated

muscled men and unbelievably well-endowed women carrying vast arrays of guns and

equipment.

---

[18] Polybagging is a marketing a technique where a comic is released in a sealed, plastic envelope that, if unopened, would ensure a perfect condition over long term storage. More commonly, collectors bought two copies, one to read, and one to save.

After an unsuccessful attempt to reboot its major superhero titles in 1996, Marvel created the Ultimate imprint that cast new versions of their classic characters in their own separate continuity. The hallmark of the Ultimate line was to recreate Marvel icons in ways that would resonate with 21st century youth culture. Ultimate Spiderman, for example, was altered from a 30-something, married, Pultizer-prize winning journalist into a brainy, disaffected teenager, whose story-arcs delved into common teenage problems as often a battle with a supervillain. After *Ultimate Spiderman* received high praise, especially for its creator team Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagely, Ultimate Marvel launched versions of the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, and the X-Men, with numerous one-shots, crossovers, mini and maxi-events of their own. The Ultimate imprint was only the beginning of the alterations that have bolstered Marvel above the financial problems it experienced in the 1990s. Their original superhero comics began running controversial stories touching upon themes of homeland security and the dangers of unquestioning patriotism, reinvigorating the medium, even as their political messages polarized their audiences. In 2004, Marvel followed both DC and Image in starting its own creator-owned imprint, Icon Comics, luring Brian Michael Bendis' and Michael Oeming's award-winning detective/superhero title *Powers* from Image. Marvel Studios, Marvel Entertainment's film subsidiary, went from jointly producing Hollywood blockbusters, like the X-Men and Spiderman movie franchises, to sole creative control with *Iron Man* in 2008. The final mark of its success is the Walt Disney Company's highly publicized purchase of the Marvel Entertainment franchise for 4 billion dollars, which will allow Marvel resources for its licensed creative material in the future.

While Marvel's stock rose, the comic industry underwent the largest alteration in production since the creation of the direct market in the late 1970s, with the popularity of the

trade paperback. In the book industry, the term trade paperback refers to any flexible, soft bound book whose cover is larger than the traditional paperback. For comic readers, however, the term is used for any collected edition of previously released comic issues, usually containing only a single story-arc, and without advertisements.   Initially, the trade paperback, or more simply "trade," format allowed publishers to release out of print comics, which would make starting a long running title less daunting for new readers. The popularity of the format, however, led publishers to release current run comics with trade editions as well, often mere months after the individual issues were available. This had unforeseen consequences, as now more comic audiences wait for the frequently more cost effective trade edition, rather than collect each individual issue. There is an ongoing debate as to whether the trade format has damaged the comic market, because publishers use their monthly issue sales to determine the success of a title. While this may be the case for their mainstream releases, many of the adult-oriented imprints, like Vertigo, rely heavily upon the new trade format for sales, as it allows their rich, complex originals greater visibility. Because the trade format fits easily upon shelves for display, more bookstores now carry comics and provide availability to the mass market for pieces like Craig Thompson's memoir of growing up in a fundamentalist Christian home in *Blankets,* or Mat Johnson's and Warren Pleece's story of a journalist passing during a time of brutal, racialized violence in *Incognegro*.   All major book chains in the United States, and many smaller stores, now have comic sections, where independent, self-produced comics share space with collected editions of the champions of the Golden Age.

　In the contemporary comic market, the latest Superman comic and a trade of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* sit next to Dark Horse's *Aliens vs. Predators*, which shares shelf space with *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical memoir of a disaffected Iranian youth, and

brushes against collected works dedicated to influential artists like Harvey Pekar or Wil Eisner. As part of American youth's growing fascination with Japanese culture, manga, the Japanese style of comics, has slowly become more popular in the United States over the last twenty five years, and recently has become a publishing phenomenon, its style and content influencing (and influenced by) the American comic industry. With the advancements of printing technology, internet marketing, and the popularity of comic conventions, like San Diego's Comic-Con, self publication has also become a viable option for creators to release their works without using either a distributor or a publishing house. This has become increasingly popular for American webcomics, whose creators release both comic-strip and comic-book style art for free online, then support themselves through audience donations and self-produced merchandise. The most successful of this new brand of creator find publishers to release their work in bookstores and the direct market; Dark Horse now publishes both Fred Gallagher's manga-influenced webcomic *Megatokyo* and the enormously popular *Penny Arcade* by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik. *Penny Arcade*, a comic initially about gaming culture,[19] has spawned both a yearly gaming convention, PAX, which in 2009 had over 60,000 participants, and a charity organization, Child's Play, that has raised over 6 million in money and donations for children's hospitals in America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Egypt, and Australia since 2003.

---

[19] Gaming initially was used to identify video gamers and their culture, but has grown to incorporate any non-sport, game activity, including board games, miniature games, collectable card games, role-playing games, console games, computer games, and the competing television shows, internet sites, movies, and books they value.

Chapter 2: How Comics Work: Theories on the Structure of Comics

It is no longer appropriate for comics scholarship to mention the dearth of studies on the medium as has been the tradition, especially by American scholars. While there was over a century between Rudolphe Töppfer's 1845 defense of comics and the first serious academic attention from French critics, since the 1960s, studies on the medium have increasingly flourished. Works have been canonized as essential for comics scholars, like Wil Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's *Undesrtanding Comics*, both with their own conventions of praise and criticism. Comics scholarship has acquired its own tradition, a semiotic approach to the study of comics formalized in France during the latter half of the 20th Century when British and American scholarship was sporadic. In the last ten years, moreover, there have been two anthologies and dozens of well-received historical, critical, and academic studies of the medium by amateurs, professionals in the field, and academics. This breadth of research addresses the conventional problems found in studies of any medium (issues of style, quality, and structure), but the most disputed question is formalistic – how should we define comics, if at all?

The most inclusionary answer is given by Scott McCloud in his seminal *Understanding Comics*. Written entirely in comic form, he explores inventive methods used within this static, visual medium to portray changes in time, space, motion, and the senses in order to establish a unified art theory of comics. The first step of this theory is to separate the definition of comics from any genre, style, printing material, or creative tool; instead, McCloud (refining Wil Eisner's

earlier definition of comics as sequential art) sees comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."[1] McCloud intentionally opens up his definition of comics in order to separate them from any negative connotations as a derivative, childish medium in order to better understand the work performed by comics. The definition he gives to accomplish this, however, would include all historical creations where words and pictures coincide, like William Hogarth's 18th century sequential paintings or any illuminated manuscripts (while also, oddly, excluding single-panel comics found in most daily newspapers).

While it is tempting for those concerned with comics' legitimacy to place Hogarth next to Batman, McCloud states that his definition would not adequately delineate comics strips and books from other art forms, and that his definition required further refinement. While there have been numerous critics, especially by those removed from comics scholarship, who have accepted McCloud's definition without reservation, others have modified McCloud's base premise or outright challenged his few exclusionary principles. David Carrier, as an example of the latter, argues that even single panel comic strips require readers to develop a sequential continuity, as the humor in these strips is frequently found in the impending, implied action. Others trace the specific, historical progression that McCloud lacks, in order to understand key moments in the development of modern comics – David Kunzle's *History of the Comic Strip* is an exhaustive, two-volume study that describes the history of visual narratives from 15th Century European art through the creation of *The Yellow Kid*. R. C. Harvey, in "How Comics Came to Be," continues the work of Kunzle in highlighting the progression of the gag comic and early comic strips from the late 19th century into the 20th century, primarily to argue against McCloud's supremacy of

---

[1] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 9.

28

visual images in a definition of comics. He states that while "McCloud maintains that comics do not have to contain words to be comics…words are clearly an integral part of what we think of when we think of comics…the thing that distinguishes it from other kinds of pictorial narratives – is the incorporation of verbal content."[2] Harvey's concern is directed towards one of the central issues in formalist comics studies – the debate for primacy of the visual or the verbal (or a blend of both).[3] Part of this formalistic uncertainty stems from the numerous works that critics have incorporated into comics' definition; as Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester describe, "'Comics,'…is very much an umbrella term which brings together a cluster of related forms: nineteenth –century illustrated stories, gag cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and many other branches of the family tree."[4] Unfortunately, it is the "family tree" aspect that causes so much confusion for formalists, and while there are obvious examples that are easy to include -- the training manuals that blended verbal instructions with comic caricature Will Eisner wrote for more than two decades -- to include every work that uses both visual and verbal elements expands the term into meaninglessness.

Other critics have attacked this need to formalize a definition of the art form; Thierry Groensteen, pulling from a thirty year history of French semiotic criticism of comics, moves away from strictly historical considerations of the medium to the underpinnings of a comics system – a language with its own fluid systems of encoding and decoding "messages of every order and narrations other than fictional."[5] In his 1999 *Système de la bande dessinée*,

---

[2] Harvey, "How Comics Came to Be," 25.

[3] For more information on this debate, see Kunzle, *The History of the Comic Strip,* Mitchell, "Beyond Comparison, or Hatfield, "An Art of Tensions."

[4] Heer, *A Comics Studies Reader,* 13.

[5] Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 19.

Groensteen, after describing the failures of an essentialist approach to comic formalism in a section labeled "The Impossible Definition," lays out the signifying constructs of comics' language, all of which are built upon the primary foundation of *iconic solidarity*, or "interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated – this specification dismisses unique enclosed images within a profusion of patterns or anecdotes – and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the face of their coexistence *in praesentia*."[6] Instead of attempting to canonize a collection of works or a central historical timeline, with all of the dogma associated with canon formation, Groensteen examines the signifying processes of comics (which I will later detail), regardless of their time period, method of production, or subject matter.[7]

While Groensteen believes that aspects of comic essentialism can be "legitimately debated," even though he doubts universal consensus, both Aaron Meskin and Joseph Witek wish to dispose of them altogether. In his 2007 "Defining Comics," Meskin demonstrates the logical fallacies in some of the more popular formalist definitions, including McCloud's, and he calls for discussion of the typical aspects of the medium. In his essay "The Arrow and the Grid" for the anthology *A Comics Studies Reader*, Witek "suggests that 'comicness' might usefully be reconceptualized from being an immutable attribute of texts to being considered as a historically contingent and evolving set of reading protocols that are applied to texts, and to be a comic text means to be *read* as a comic."[8] As evidence, he describes early comic book reading practices

---

[6] Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 18.

[7] While Groensteen is willing to examine all forms of comics to understand their language, he is not as open when commenting on their quality. He laments that "all too often the history of the medium takes the form of an egalitarian chronicle where masterpieces and less glorious works are treated as equivalents, while, at the same time, the artists who 'sell' are continually the object of fetishistic celebrations in which critical analysis has littler place" (1).

[8] Witek, "The Arrow and the Grid," 149.

that required comic panel numbering and panel arrows to inscribe reading practices to an

audience unfamiliar with a new medium. Witek argues that as these practices became

internalized, they were no longer essential and gave way to contemporary methods of panel

breakdown and layout and demonstrates that any formalistic aspect of comics may be "undone as

reading conventions and textual practices continue to revise each other."[9] For the purpose of this

study, I will approach comics through their contemporary production, agreeing with Meskin and

Witek that it is in comics traditions that meaning of a historical moment may be best understood.

To understand these traditions, however, it is necessary to describe the unique reading

practices required by the medium. Sequential art, regardless of form, is unique in using a series

of static images that capture specific moments in order to construct a fluid narrative that

simulates motion in both space and time. In Will Eisner's words:

> the format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus
>
> required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regiments of art (e.g.,
>
> perspective, symmetry, line) and the regiments of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax)
>
> become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel[10] is an act of both
>
> aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit.[11]

In order to accomplish the illusion of motion in space-time, what Groensteen calls the spatio-

topia, artists have developed enduring conventions in traditional comics (comic strips and comic

---

[9] Witek, "The Arrow and the Grid," 155.

[10] There is some debate on the difference between a graphic novel and a comic. Traditionally, graphic novel has been used to denote a longer work by a single author and bound in trade format. The term, however, has been preempted by art and literary critics in order to provide legitimacy to the comic medium (i.e., "this isn't a comic book, it is a graphic novel"). As one of the purposes of this study is to overcome this reactive response to comics, I will use the term comics for all works, reserving the term trade to refer comics in trade paperback format.

[11] Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 2.

books) and have constantly revised them for the needs of their audiences since the time of Rodolphe Töpffer. The foremost of these traditions, and the one most associated with comic art and possibly the reason for its historic lack of critical reception, is the use of caricature. Traditionally, caricature was seen as either a comedic style or entirely ambiguous and unclear,[12] so it was historically dismissed as possessing less substance, and since comics rely so heavily upon it, the form's association with "low art" solidified during the 19th and early 20th centuries.[13] As terms like "high art" and "low art" have become increasingly meaningless, comics critics, like cultural studies theorists, aim to uncover the value in forms earlier dismissed as plebian through understanding how they convey meaning (and, for caricature, specifically how it constructs meaning through symbolic, rather than realistic, art). Stephen E. Tabachnick, to cite a specific example of the form's power, argues that caricature is the only form capable of addressing unthinkable atrocities like the Holocaust,[14] while theorists like Scott McCloud focus on the medium's universality – believing that caricature (or as he calls it, cartooning) is capable of "amplify[ing]…meaning in a way that realistic art can't."[15]

While caricature is an artistic style of comics, the form's most recognizable, and unique, icon is the comic panel. By 1910, American (and most European) newspapers had solidified into using structured, gridded panels, which were meant to be read from left-to-right and top-to-

---

[12] For more information on the history of caricature, see Carrier, *A Comic Studies Reader,* 105-115.

[13] Groensteen, "Why are Comics," 9. Groensteen agrees that the use of caricature marred comics reputation as a legitmate art form, he finds that it is secondary to the critical reception literature and drawing unreasonably receive when conjoined, as they are "dethroned and debased as soon as they are side by side in a mixed media.

[14] Tabachnick, "Of *Maus* and Memory," 154-162.

[15] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 30.

bottom.[16] The panel structure is intended to "establish[] the position of the reader in relation to the scene and indicates the duration of the event...it effectively 'tells' time," as a single panel delineates a section of time and point of view for the audience, which provides the illusion of moving action.[17] Whereas film fools the human eye with its rapid frames-per-second, comic panels must use more complicated methods to indicate physical motion and the passage of time. The panel box contains the action, and the layout of those boxes on the page parses the action of the comic as readily as punctuation does for a sentence. Wil Eisner argues that the panel is the artist's primary means of controlling the audience's attention, and its frame becomes an aspect of the comic's narrative. The frame's shape, size, coloring, or absence is as important to the comic as its dialogue, as the panel's appearance can indicate alterations in emotion, atmosphere, or mood. When figures "break" the frame, as seen in Figure 2.1, the action becomes frenzied and uncontrolled, while a panel's absence, as seen in Figure 2.2, signifies unlimited potential, serenity, or forethought on the part of the characters. Dream sequences may possess a "pillowed" or "cloud-like" border, or the border might be drawn as a window that looks in on the characters and gives the scene a crowded or claustrophobic feeling. Though it is common for panels to contain only a single moment in a series of actions, it is also possible for them to contain as much time as the artist is capable of rendering, [18] and there are a series of conventions – like motion lines, blurring, written "sound" effects, contiguous backgrounds, first-person

---

[16] For more information on the invention and conventions of the comics panel, Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip,* and *The History of the Comic Strip, Vol II.*

[17] Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 26.

[18] See Figure 2.3

visualizations, or panel-in-panel compositions – developed to show movement in space and time.[19]

In an attempt to better define the interaction between image, story, and framing of the panel, Groensteen argues that the spatial layout can be mapped semiotically, from a panel's physical makeup to its multiple "functions [that] open up a range of formal possibilities, allowing the frame to fully participate in the specific rhetoric of each author."[20] One of these functions of the panel, what Groensteen termed the separative function, is also addressed by Paul Lefèvre in his essay "The Construction of Space in Comics" and breaks a panel into its "diegetic space (the fictive space in which the characters live and act)" and its "extradiegetic space."[21] He argues that readers construct a three-dimensional understanding of the character's existence through both what is present in the panel and the aspects that "remain unseen" – not only what the reader imagines lays outside the panel, but what remains hidden within the panel itself by figures or objects drawn by the artist – and it is in the relationship between these two aspects that the reader creates meaning.

The fictive space outside of the comic, where the reader imagines the movement in space and time implied by the panel's construction, has received quite a bit of attention from comics theorists and received its own definition – the gutter. Officially, the gutter refers to the gap between one panel and the next, and while it is usually filled with blank space, this is not always the case.[22] According to McCloud, the gutter is an essential aspect of comic readership, as it is where an audience commits closure, his term for the systematic understanding of a whole while

---

[19] For more information on these artist conventions, see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 94-117.

[20] Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 39.

[21] Lefèvre, "The Construction of Space," 157.
[22] See Figure 2.4.

only perceiving some of its parts – it is the mental process by which we construct our concept of the world, even though we can never witness its entirety. In comics, he argues, moments of closure involve much more of the reader's participation than in television and film, where closure is instantaneous and involuntary because of the speed of the moving images.   While a comics artist can insinuate changes in motion and time through recognized symbols (speed lines for motion, or the movement of a clock to denote time, for example), comics panels capture so little of a story's action that the audience becomes a co-creator of the finished product since they are required to imagine a great deal more narrative. While there are numerous examples of the action of a film or television occurring "off screen" in a similar fashion, it is much more common in comics because of the limit in the number of images available to the viewer. The moment of time processed in the gutter might be only a millisecond, but it could also expand to minutes, days, or years, depending on the purpose of the narrative, or even capture a single moment from a variety of viewpoints to establish a particular setting or mood.

One of the more unique creative tools of the comics medium is the methods of presentation for dialogue and narration, and the presence of the linguistic aspect of comics has sparked a vibrant debate among theorists over the supremacy, or even necessity, of words and images. Each side of the supremacy debate has its proponents, and it is certainly true for those who endorse essentialist definitions that there are a variety of comics available without words, yet they are still widely used in a majority of the medium. The most iconic incorporation of words in contemporary comics is the balloon, and much like the panel above, there are numerous conventions in artistic style to delineate spoken words, thoughts, mechanical recordings, and omniscient narration, as well as to indicate a character's personality traits or mood.[23]

---

[23] For more information on speech conventions in comics, see Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 24.

Figure 2.1: Animal Man's fall is shown to be aggressive and out-of-control as he breaks through the panel in Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*.

Figure 2.2: In an attempt to show the limitless distance of the white gate, ____ removes the panel border from behind Lucifer Morningstar, the protagonist of Mike Carey's *Lucifer*.

Figure 2.3: This single page, from Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez's *Locke & Key*, encapsulates a dramatic struggle between two characters, drawn in a single panel.

Figure 2.4: The placement of the two central panels on top of another larger panel eliminates the gutter entirely. Panel taken from Mike Carey's *Lucifer*.

Chapter 3: Negotiating Wartime Masculinity in Bill Willingham's *Fables*

In 2002, Vertigo Press, a subsidiary of DC Comics known for its adult audiences and mature themes, began releasing a new monthly serialized comic book, *Fables*, that follows an ensemble cast of immortal European fairy tales that have fled an invasion of their homelands into the "real world." Written by Bill Willingham, *Fables* quickly earned a great deal of praise within the industry, and to date has won seven Eisner awards, including Best New Series in 2003 and Best Serialized Story in 2003, 2005, and 2006.[1] A majority of the comic is set in Fabletown, a secretive community founded during the initial colonization of what would become the United States. Hiding within New York City, the fables have constructed a government whose sole purpose is to keep humanity, who they refer to as the mundys, unaware of their existence. Living within Fabletown, or in its sister community the Farm (a place where fables unable to pass among human society are forced to live), are dozens of familiar characters, including Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Jack Horner, the Three Little Pigs, and Pinocchio. Willingham, like Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, and countless others before him, has reshaped these iconic figures with his own reinterpretations that interrogate and complicate their traditional representations, many of whom reflect political and social issues of the present era. Willingham's Goldilocks, for example, is a firebrand who spews socialist rhetoric while arming for a confrontation with a Fabletown government she sees as having forced its non-human constituents into an oppressive commune.

---

[1] The Eisner Award, named after comic creator Wil Eisner, is the most prestigious award given to comic artists, writers, and productions.

The character who stands in opposition to Goldilocks, or any who would attempt to oppose Fabletown's lawful government, is its Sheriff – Bigby Wolf.   Part hard-nosed detective, part soldier, part anti-hero (to name only a few of the myths that inform his character), he is the embodiment of the villainous wolves of European fairy tale and the closest *Fables* has to a protagonist. After receiving a pardon for past deeds, along with every other fable that successfully fled the Adversary, Bigby was convinced to serve as the strong arm of the new community, a position he has held continually for nearly 400 years. With a cigarette perpetually in hand, Bigby works as "a pretty eclectic mix of small town sheriff and clandestine spy-master," complete with the bedraggled uniform of the Hollywood police detective.[2] His dress shirt is rolled to the sleeves, his tie is loosened, his face covered in a constant five o'clock shadow; with the inclusion of the habitual beige trench coat, his appearance is distinctly reminiscent of Clint Eastwood ala *Dirty Harry*, only with more muscle mass.   The stereotypic cop, however, is only one aspect of the myriad narratives that create Bigby Wolf; there are centuries of cultural ideologies that contribute to his makeup. His personal history strongly reverberates with Campbellian mythical heroes, who are marked as outsiders from birth with powers beyond mere humanity. Also a werewolf, a monstrous creature with its own mythology, Bigby is linked to creatures like Grendel as much as he is connected to heroes like Beowulf.   He is also twice cast directly into the mold of a soldier, one set on the German front during World War II, and the other a "modern day" counterinsurgency story that is strongly attuned to the mythology of the Vietnam War era.

Because of the plethora of mythical facets that contribute to Bigby's persona, I argue that he serves as what Homi Bhabha calls a "liminal margin," where pedagogical, nationalistic and

---

[2] Willingham, *The Mean Seasons* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 104.

resistant narrative discourses construct, maneuver, and negotiate identity.[3]   Since *Fables* has

only been published in a post 9/11 America during a time of war, its narratives are influenced by

the politics of the war that surrounds its creation. While Bigby's character provides numerous

perspectives from which to understand the current cultural production of a country at war, it is

the ties between his heroic portrayal and the complex discourses of masculine identity,

specifically for men at war, that I find particularly illuminating. Bigby's masculinity is in

constant negotiation with a hybridity of older engendering narratives, from the mythical hero

soldier of World War II to the cowboy/outlaw hero at war with a capitalist oppressor, to name

only a few. As a lover of *Fables*, I am disturbed by the stiflingly rigid masculinity that is

privileged within the text, but am not surprised that such a nostalgic, hypermasculine ideal as

found in the propaganda narratives of World War II is evidenced during a time of growing

national conservatism. It was brought to my attention that this is a collection of fables, and as

such it may be playing with American mythology as much as it is European folklore. In this, I

agree, but the ideology that *Fables* invokes is not wholly satiric. While there are moments of

political slander, which include a joking comparison of the Young Republicans to the Nazi Party,

[4] the comic is not a political satire, but is instead subtly informed by the politics of the day. In an

interview with *The Comics Journal*, the author addresses the inherent politics of *Fables*, stating

that:

> Someone much smarter than me said, 'The purpose of art is not to tell your readers what
> to do, but to show your readers who they are.' And so, as much as politics are going to

---

[3] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 208-209. Bhabha contends that "[t]he people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference…[t]he scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as a narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*."

[4] Willingham, *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, 185.

intrude in *Fables*, that's as far as I think I'm willing to go. It's impossible to keep that out entirely. We're all political creatures whether we cop to it or not…And every once in a while, something does get in…it's not going to be a political tract. It never will be, but at the same time, it's not going to shy away from the fact that there are characters who have real moral and ethical centers, and we're not going to apologize for it…There's never going to be my substitute story for the war in Iraq and what I think about it. But my opinion will get in there on just the defining qualities for why we do stuff like that. [5]

In this, the author believes he is revealing the readers for "who they are," and his construction of an ideal, heroic man is inherently problematic in his connections to a rigid, conservative hegemonic masculinity. The intentions of the author are impossible to determine, yet if *Fables* is a mirror held to American society, then it displays a country that glorifies war and the soldiers who fight them.

This should, perhaps, not be surprising; the comic medium has long had a reputation for "its apparently hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts"[6] (which is remarkably cogent considering the role they play in shaping American youth).[7] As a genre, comic books are often the first introduction that American boys have to literature. With emblematic figures and stories that transcend singular mediums of popular culture (Superman, *Sin City*, *V for Vendetta*), the comic industry is an excellent place to investigate how Americans are currently addressing any form of cultural production, including the mythologizing of a wartime masculinity. Famed historian Richard Slotkin, in his discussion of the cowboy myth in American culture, states that:

> while the play of continuity and revision in the grand structure of a myth/ideological system cannot be described in its totality, indications of the balance of change and continuity in the system can nevertheless be followed by examining developments within particular forms or genres of expression…Within the structured marketplace of myths, the continuity and persistence of particular genres may be seen as keys to identifying the culture's deepest and most persistent concerns. Likewise, major breaks in the

---

[5] Willingham, "Interviews."

[6] Reynolds, *Superheroes,* 7.

[7] Wright, *Comic Book Nation.*

development of important genres may signal the presence of a significant crisis of cultural values and organization.[8]

In this vein, *Fables* serves as an important crossroads of genres, which only begin with revisionist fairy tales and comic books, that map the incorporation, resistance, or continuation of hegemonic processes in American masculinity.

Slotkin also argues that the actions of the protagonist define a code of behavior for the audience, not only within the realm of the story, but in the "real world" which the story represents.[9] This process is first achieved through the celebration of Bigby as a mythical hero, which inscribes the Sheriff as an emblematic figure to revere. In *Legends in Exile*, the first story arc which earned *Fables* two of its seven Eisner Awards, Bigby investigates the apparent murder of Rose Red, while beginning to woo his boss, Deputy Mayor Snow White and sister to the murder victim. Throughout this episode, he demonstrates a character built upon strength, perception, and intelligence. More importantly, he exerts his authority in his relationships with other fables; he bests a muscled Jack Horner, intimidates the noble and authoritarian Bluebeard into humiliated tears, and asserts dominance continually over Snow White. The action of the first collection of *Fables* is entirely controlled by Bigby, and the narrative literally becomes his show when he stages a "big reveal," ala serial detective fiction, where he calls all involved together to "reveal *who* did *what*, *how* they did it – and most *important* – how *I* figured it all out."[10] While later episodes do not place Bigby at the center of every individual issue, he is still

---

[8] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation,* 7-8.

[9] Slotkin. *Regeneration through Violence,* 8-9.

[10] Willingham, *Legends in Exile,* 99. It is important to note that in the comic medium, it is traditional to use bolded words for emphasis in most of the dialogue. The words that the author chose to highlight will become increasingly more important in the construction of Bigby's masculine identity.

portrayed as Fabletown's central heroic figure whose presence (or absence) dominates the comic.[11]

As the central hero of Fabletown, Bigby more closely resembles the outlaw cultural heroes (ala Jesse James or Robin Hood) than the traditional ones, especially more fairy-tale oriented heroes like Prince Charming. In fact, Prince Charming in *Fables* is a manipulative, womanizing cad whose wives (who include Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella) leave him soon after discovering his weaknesses. Bigby, unlike his love interest's ex-husband, takes direct action, sidestepping certain legalities that would hamstring him in protecting the citizens of the community.[12] As part of his duties as Sheriff, he recruits private fables to spy for him amongst the larger fable community, stashing away hidden resources (like the goose that lays golden eggs) to finance these semi-legal activities. After Baba Yaga is defeated by Frau Totenkinder, the embodiment of the witches of European folktale, the Russian sorceress is imprisoned by Bigby beneath the earth for interrogation, while publicly burying someone else in her place to assuage the fears of the populace. When dealing with bureaucrats or those like Bluebeard who control capitalist modes of production (similar to the cattle barons of 40s era westerns), he refuses to obey civil rules, knowing that a forceful confrontation will gain him the knowledge that diplomacy cannot.

Bigby's past, occasionally hinted at during the main narrative, helps to underscore his cultural hero status. Born the runt of a litter off of a she-wolf by the North Wind, Bigby endures

---

[11] For clarity, I will use episode to indicate a graphic novel collection like *The Mean Seasons* or *Legends in Exile*, while the word issue refers to the monthly serials that make up those collections (i.e., the episode *Legends in Exile* collects *Fables* issues #1-5).

[12] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation,* 298. In a discussion of the heroic portrayal of Jesse James in Hollywood westerns, Slotkin notes that "he is first of all the incarnation of the principle of direct and pragmatic action…He solves problems without resort to litigation or abstract theory, confronting each question on its own terms and resolving it in the handiest, most efficient way."

punishments and ridicule by his older siblings, until he vows to devour something larger every

day than he had the day before. Because of the power of this oath, Bigby grows into a monstrous

beast, whose first human meal is Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. His destruction

of the populace of the fairytale landscape continues until he is turned into a tool of civilization

after falling in love with the princess Snow White, who casts a spell allowing him to shift

between wolf and human at will. Bigby's lycanthrope nature only aids in evoking terrifying

imagery for an American audience.[13] That the line between hero and monster can be tenuous,

however, is not only a trait of *Fables*; Victor Brombert argues that:

> [Heroes] live by a fierce personal code, they are unyielding in the face of adversity;
> moderation is not their forte, but rather boldness and even overboldness. Heroes are
> definitely committed to honor and pride. Though capable of killing the monster, they
> themselves are often dreadful, even monstrous.[14]

Bigby's connection with a horrific past, as well as his current honorable conduct, only

strengthens his connection to an American heroic imagination fueled by stories of redemption

and second chances found within the mythology of Jesse James.[15]

These heroic narrative roles are only elements of the heteroglossia of Bigby's portrayal,

though their presence strengthens the power of disseminating (or mirroring) constructions of

American masculine identity. One of these heteroglossic threads that most predominantly

structures wartime masculinity takes place in two issues of *The Mean Seasons*, where a mundy

gives a diary-like account of a secretive mission where he infiltrates the German front in 1944

---

[13] Oakley, "Historical Overview," 1. In discussing the werewolf myth in American culture, he states that "[w]olves prowl through our subconscious: red-eyed, devious, conspiratorial wolves that kill to satiate their lust. Soulless demons pursuing horse-drawn sleights through the dark winter forest. These wolves of our Anglo-American cultural mind may have little in common with the wolves that live and die, largely unseen, in the northern forests and tundra. But centuries of legends, myths, stories, art and belief in a wolf that is the physical embodiment of evil are not easily dispelled."

[14] Brombert, *In Praise of Antiheroes*, 3.

[15] This is especially relevant considering Bigby's refusal to murder, even though it provides a useful solution for the problems of an inclusive community that desires privacy and secrecy above all else.

with a hand-picked team (straight out of John Sturges's *Magnificent Seven*) that included Bigby.

[16] Like many glamorized stories of Americans at war, this war narrative is fueled with ideology-driven marketing. The gritty realism of war is absent in these historical productions, and in their place are poster tales found in recruitment advertisements and propaganda films of the 1940s that create an ideology of soldiers as heroic champions serving their country.[17] In a reaction to this idealization, Paul Fussell wrote *Wartime* to detail vividly the physical and psychological brutality of war, as well as the frequent incompetence of a military system that encourages doubt in its soldiers.[18] This historically accurate structure of feeling for an American military has been manipulated repeatedly by many American politicians, who invoke the fictional cultural memory of World War II.[19]

Fables issues #28 and #29, entitled "Dog Company: War Stories," also invoke this cultural memory, creating a narrative filled with artificial and restrictive notions of a masculinity that encourages emotional reserve, the ability to endure pain, a refusal to admit fear in the face of death, and an ability to connect with other men only in the womanless space of war. The front cover of issue #28, seen in Figure 3.1, seems straight out of 1940s pulp adventure fiction displaying Bigby, cigarette clenched between his teeth, and "his" men wearing a curiously vague American uniform storming over barbed wire, guns in hand (ironically, not only is stealth, rather than heroic action, the focus of the two-issue story, Bigby is never seen wearing an American

---

[16] Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism*, xvi. Braudy contends that "[j]ust as epic formulas focus on the hero with his undying fame, war focuses attention on certain ways of being a man and ignores or arouses suspicions about others." This is doubly true for Bigby, as the epic hero is as part of his characterization as his warrior nature.

[17] Grandstaff, "Visions of New Men."

[18] Fussell, *Wartime,* ix. In his preface, he states that "[f]or the past fifty years the Allied war has been sanitized and romanticized almost beyond recognition by the sentimental, the loony patriotic, the ignorant, and the bloodthirsty. I have tried to balance the scales."

[19] Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy," 338-340.

uniform). The truth of the story, however, is not as important as the ideology it enforces, which concentrates on honor, stoic acceptance, and bravery.[20] The framing story accounts Bigby's relationship with the only surviving member of Dog Company, Duffy.   After reservedly accepting the news of his impending death by cancer, Duffy reveals to Bigby that he had recorded the fantastic events that occurred that summer in 1944. When Bigby expresses concern that Duffy broke his promise never to tell a soul, the old soldier's response demonstrates his continual concern for his fellow soldier and his own principles: "But I never promised I wouldn't write it down – *strictly* for myself. And since you've still got *your* secrets to keep, I can't pass this on to anyone but you and still check out with any honor."[21] During the soldier's ordeal, which eventually leads them to Frankenstein Castle deep in German occupied territory, the men encounter heavy resistance which decimates their numbers. In the words of the narrator Duffy:

> And then the shooting started, and just like that we were all back in the war again. We had good positions. But they had us outgunned and outmanned. Basically, we knew we were screwed. We had no idea where Sergeant Harp or that Bigby fellow had disappeared to. Inevitably it turned out bad for us. But we held on. And then, all of a sudden, Harp *appeared* again – a vengeful god of war. But ultimately still mortal. And finally a small ray of hope – the order to retreat.[22]

Dispersed amongst this prose (that underscores their refusal to quit until given permission by authority) are visuals of the American soldiers fighting overwhelming odds, shouting out encouragement like "one shot, one kill, Zilmer," and "fish in a barrel, Sarge."[23] It is not out of

---

[20] Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity*, 177. Phillips states that "Western gender discourse has further associated masculinity with bravery, and then defined bravery in terms of stoically bearing physical pain (an oddly passive ideal considering the opporbirum placed on passivity), rather than the emotional courage of opening oneself to caring or the moral courage of standing with a minority against a push of war. Courage may also be erroneously defined as fearlessness, assumed of 'real men' but not of women."

[21] Willingham, *The Mean Seasons*, 32.

[22] Willingham, *The Mean Seasons*, 59-65.

[23] It is useful to note that the names chosen for the soldiers, Zilmer, Schmactenberg, Levine, Supinski, Tice, Harp, and Duffy, resonate with the cultural-inclusionary myth of the World War II military – with its collection of German, Jewish, Irish, Polish, and English surnames.

their own pain that they cry out for their medic, but when one of their own is felled. Multiple

soldiers sacrifice their lives in order to protect others, Sergeant Harp dies attempting to save

Bigby and Sergeant Supinski gives the rest of the men time to flee by "staying behind" to stall

the German forces. Bigby also participates in this camaraderie by entrusting the remaining men

with his secret, in violation of the Fabletown Charter, in order to save the lives of his fellow

soldiers.

It is not the admirable behavior under fire, or the companionship that the men develop

that are of concern, but the hegemonic ideology that is connected to this mythical archetype. I

am disquieted that during this current war, when superhero comics are experiencing a rupture in

their pro-authoritarian structures, [24] *Fables* invokes the cultural memory of the masculine hero-

soldier in a war worth fighting. In a discussion over masculine portrayals of wartime identity,

Christina S. Jarvis argue that:

> Until we recognize both war's true impact on the body and the countless abject
> masculinities that existed alongside the hypermasculinized hegemonic models offered
> during World War II, we will continue to perpetuate narratives of the 'good war' passed
> down by the victory culture. Without a more complicated and embodied account of the
> war, the cultural memory of World War II will no doubt be wrongly invoked time and
> again to engender and legitimize other armed conflicts. [25]

Fables continues the perpetuation through its connection to older, idealized masculine tropes.

The strength of a large, muscular male body is consistently on display, as blatantly demonstrated

in the physical battle between Bigby-as-werewolf and Frankenstein's monster, both ripping

through clothes and flesh. Neither courage nor duty are questioned, both the possibility of

---

[24] Kading, "Drawn into 9/11," 221. In a review of the works released by the two major comic presses, DC Comics and Marvel Comics, Kading finds that "perhaps noteworthy by their absence, is that there are no declarations affirming faith or trust in political leaders or government institutions, even though our superheroes failed us. Rather, the superheroes admonish contemporary political powers to act as superheroes would."

[25] Jarvis, *The Male Body at War*, 191.

cowardly behavior and the potential to disobey direct orders is entirely removed from the narrative. Never does Bigby or his "Dog Company," question the righteousness of the American cause or the treatment they receive at the hands of the military. When discussing Bigby's leave of absence during both world wars, Snow White casts doubt on their connection to the mundy plight. Bigby responds by stating that she had a "short-sighted way to look at things. A wolf grows up knowing he needs to *protect* his territory or risk losing it. We've each been part of this country *far* longer than any mundy. Some might reasonably argue that that only *increases* our duty to fight for it."[26] The reality of military blunders are absent, as are the ingrained behaviors, faulty communication, and poor decisions that make military life worse than necessary -- what Paul Fussell refers to as "chickenshit."[27]

Intriguingly, this pro-government attitude carries over into the counterinsurgency tale "Happily Ever After," removing the powerful social critique that is a hallmark of the Vietnam era story genre on which it is based. *Fables* issue #50 is a nine-part narrative, eight chapters and an epilogue, that end in Bigby's marriage to his estranged lover Snow White. In the interim volumes, Bigby impregnates Snow White while they are both ensorcelled, and because she bears seven partially-human children, she is forced by law to take the children to the Farm – where Bigby is not allowed to live. Separated from his family, he escapes into the wilds of Alaska, until he is recalled by an operative of the Fabletown government to infiltrate the Adversary's stronghold in order to make a strategic strike on an important military resource. "Happily Ever After" depicts this mission, covering his insertion into enemy territory, his skills as a counterinsurgency warrior, his confrontation with the Adversary – Gepetto, the father of Pinocchio, the return to the community, and his rewarded marriage to Snow White.

---

[26] Willingham, *March of the Wooden Soldiers,* 92.

[27] Fussell, *Wartime*, 79-95.

With the sole exception of Bigby's welcome return, this narrative is highly reminiscent of the counterinsurgency tales that originated after the Korean War and remained influential up through the Reagan era. Richard Slotkin details the origination of the Special Forces, contemporary counterinsurgency warriors, whose methods returned to a style of warfare developed in America during the confrontations with the Native Americans.[28] The American fascination with counter-guerilla soldiers, whose knowledge of the enemy allowed them to skillfully and purposefully conduct violence, began to cross into Hollywood with the 1956 classic *The Searchers* where John Wayne portrays Ethan Edwards, "the man who knows Indians."[29] There is a decided shift, however, in the portrayal of these counterinsurgency warriors, especially as the nation becomes increasingly more opposed to their presence in countries, like Korea and Vietnam, which require them. Movies like *Missing in Action* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* seriously question the nature of the government that attempts to use the hypermasculine skills of their heroes. In these films, the hero is recruited by a feminized government, responsible for the alienation of the hero from his society, and the government ultimately proves to be a greater threat to solider than any outside force.[30]

These negative connotations are absent in "Happily Ever After," though the other elements of these tales remain. Mowgli of *The Jungle Book*, "the boy raised by wolves," has

---

[28] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 453-458. "Their missions, which were usually coordinated with conventional operations, involved the infiltration of enemy positions prior to an assault, the seizure (by speed and stealth) of objectives too strong to be taken by conventional assault, and various type of raids designed to divert enemy forces or damage vital facilities."

[29] Another avenue of investigation that I have ignored is the racial production within *Fables*. Bigby is more than a "man that knows Indians," he is more than a native – he is a nature deity and a god among wolves. That he has chosen to appear as a white man, and actively desires a woman named Snow White, complicates this relationship.

[30] Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America,* 168-169. In this excellent book, Jefford accounts how Vietnam veterans in the mass media increasingly became seen as "victimized by his own government…[and] the final step of this process was to transfer the accumulated negative features of the feminine to the government itself."

been asked by Prince Charming[31] to locate Bigby, the "only man who *can*" penetrate the enemy home base.[32] With his muscular body on display in a sleeveless, tight t-shirt and cargo shorts, Bigby infiltrates the enemy after climbing a beanstalk into the clouds and parachuting behind enemy lines. After quietly massacring dozens of guards through stealth and skill, he rigs explosives to Gepetto's magical wood that allows him access to the automatons that had invaded Fabletown in *March of the Wooden Soldiers*. Once he has determined that he is unable to further damage Gepetto's resources, he confronts the Adversary to deliver an ultimatum: stop attacking Fabletown or suffer exponentially greater damage in return, which he then demonstrates by detonating the explosives and destroying the wood and Gepetto's home.[33] Retreating to his exit point, he climbs another beanstalk, before escaping into the cloud realms and eventually back to Fabletown.

His specialized skills, hypermasculine body image, and competency in infiltration uncover the narrative of the counterinsurgency warrior within Bigby's multi-faceted narrative influences; however, the traditional anti-government stance is missing. The new mayor of Fabletown does nothing to impede Bigby's progress, providing all materials necessary to his success. When Bigby returns triumphant, it is not to an uncaring institution, but to a collection of friends who embrace his return to the community. Beast, who had taken his position of Sheriff in the interim, even attempts to give Bigby his former position – one he declines. Instead, Bigby accepts a large swath of land that neighbors the Farm where he and his family are

---

[31] As I will address later in the essay, Prince Charming is aligned with the feminized, childish masculinity that defines Bigby through its opposition to his pragmatic, direct heroism.

[32] Willingham, *Homelands*, 142.

[33] Willingham, "Interviews." This chapter is entitled "The Israel Analogy," in which Fabletown has decided to mimic Israel, who when surrounded by enemies that desire their extinction, cause greater damage to anyone who assaults them. In the Willingham interview from *The Comics Journal*, he comments on his political sympathies for Israel's battle against the Arab nations.

allowed access, ending the story in the arms of his new wife. In the end, this particular narrative, with its pro-government "hero wins the day" resolution, is significant because it is demonstrative of "major breaks in the development of important genres" that underline a growing conservatism in American culture.[34]

The anti-government stance is not the only traditional aspect of cultural war narratives that are missing in Bigby's war stories. Within "Dog Company" and "Happily Ever After," there are no *overt* attempts to construct manhood in blatant opposition to the feminine, a significant aspect of what Robert Connell terms hegemonic masculinity.[35] The casual insults of "sissy" or "lady," so familiar in our war narratives to encode an anti-emotional masculinity, are absent. In fact, teasing of any kind is gone; it is only outside of war that this form of hegemony occurs within *Fables*. It is not among the soldiers, but in connection to (or truly, opposition against) the other main male characters that Bigby's masculinity is constructed. Instead of building manhood in opposition to a femininity seen as weak, the men of *Fables* return to 19th century models of masculine identity that are formed in opposition to boyhood, which is intriguing considering the medium's cultural connection to children.[36] Childishness, impulsiveness, and cowardliness are the hallmarks of the "boys" – Jack, the Frog Prince, and Bluebeard – and Bigby is the first to openly scorn those characters for their failings. Throughout *Fables*, Bigby constantly teases Jack,

---

[34] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 8

[35] Connell, *Gender and Power,* 183-186. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies, and so forth." As men are encoded through these methods to become masculine, they internalize their own dominance over women and other marginalized and subordinate masculinities. These other masculinities are vaguely defined, thus preventing alternatives from gaining any recognition in the public sphere.

[36] Rotundo, *American Manhood.* Rotundo sees 19th Century masculinity as an attempt to separate manhood from boyhood. This stark division of man/boy was dropped for a division between man and woman found in the 20th Century.

calling him "sonny boy" or "poor baby."[37] When Boy Blue and the Frog Prince (whom they refer to as Flycatcher) complain about the work Bigby has given them, he mocks them for their weakness, then demonstrates his own exhaustion privately, covering his face with one hand while alone in his bedroom. Other characters participate in this teasing, especially Bluebeard, who calls Jack a "pathetic, bleating child" or insinuates that Bigby has become a tamed, domesticated animal.

Even when Bigby pulls together Boy Blue, Flycatcher, Prince Charming, and Bluebeard as a special team to confront a reporter fully aware of their immortal nature, their masculinities are each questioned in turn. Boy Blue, eyes and smile wide, cheerfully and innocently asks if the others feel like they are in a caper flick while in mid-mission and is later called "sonny boy" by Jack, establishing a hierarchy of masculinity. When Bluebeard confronts Bigby about his unwillingness to carry through on his threats, Bigby intimidates the noble in the most humiliating scene in the comic to date, leaving Bluebeard in silent tears:

> I haven't *needed* to act, because you've always backed down and always *will*. Sure, you're a terror when gutting unarmed *brides* on their wedding night, or gunning down an unconscious man on a *toilet*. You're a *coward* bluebeard, hiding behind a lifetime of wealth and privilege. Now, unless you're prepared to throw down…I *thought* so, tough guy. When you get done pissing yourself with fear, tuck tail and do what I *told* you to do. *Obey me*.[38]

Even Beast, Bigby's replacement as Sheriff, is described in comparison to Bigby as "an overgrown kid having fun playing secret agent," while Bigby is authentic.[39] It would be a

---

[37] Willingham, *Legends in Exile*, 41. Further eliminating Bigby from "alternative masculinities," Bigby's past with Little Red Riding Hood removes his connections to cross-dressing. Jacks challenges Bigby by asking "Or does that *protection* only apply to granny-gobbling *wolves* who don shepherd's clothing to become low-rent *cops* during the exile." Jack mixes his metaphors, beginning with the well known legend, but ending with the adage about a wolf in sheep's clothing.

[38] Willingham, *Storybook Love*, 56-57.

[39] Willingham, *Homelands*, 139.

mistake, however, to assume that physical age (or appearance, as these characters are centuries old) has a direct bearing on "boyishness" or masculinity. Mowgli, for instance, is "the boy raised by wolves," but is depicted in the same terms of masculinity that inform Bigby, perhaps because of his connection to Bigby's natural form. As well, Boy Blue is at his most "masculine" when he breaks single-handedly assaults the Homelands in order to assassinate the Adversary.[40] The idea of "boy" in these stories is reserved for behavior, as nearly everyone remarks that Jack is an immature child when he physically appears to be in his twenties, and Flycatcher was a father when the invasion of his kingdom began. These constructions of a manly behavior in opposition to boyhood are inherently problematic; they reserve "true" feelings of bravery and strength for those who have demonstrated dominance, while systematically deteriorating respect for boys and youth culture.

This is not to say that the creation of masculinity within *Fables* escapes the sexism inherent in earlier versions, where men are trained to identify "womanly" traits as objectionable. While it is true that the male-oriented hegemonic negotiations in *Fables* are not built upon men teasing men about being women, feminine empowerment, or at least a lack of feminine demonizing, is questioned by the portrayal of Bigby's counterpart, coworker, and co-star, Snow White. When the portrayal of women is closely examined, specifically in the relationship between Bigby Wolf and Snow White, masculinity in *Fables* can be seen continuing to encourage masculinity in opposition to femininity that is perceived as emotional and submissive. I argue that lack of insults like "sissy" and "little girl" in Bigby's war narratives are examples of

---

[40] Unlike Mowgli and Bigby, however, Boy Blue requires the aid of two powerful magical items to make this attempt, which ultimately fails in its stated purpose, though he is able to escape with desperately needed information.

what Fredric Jameson terms manifest content that is censored by the underlying feminine

"weakness" that underscores Bigby and Snow White's portrayals.[41]

Despite the portrayal of overly-emotional females as "weak," *Fables* does not necessarily

imply that vulnerability to emotions is inherently weak, only that Bigby does not participate in

them, even when forcibly separated from his family. During this five year span, he experiences

his grief stoically in forms that meet masculine approval. When finally united with Snow White,

he admits to having an affair, explaining that: "Sarah's *one* of the ways I tried to forget you. I

also tried booze and solitude. Nothing worked. How could it?"[42] Snow White, however, is

frequently portrayed with tearful expressions, or in crying "fits." While Bigby does not mock

Snow White for her perceived femininity, he frequently reminds her of her inherent

emotionalism. During the questioning of Jack for her sister's murder, Snow White breaks down,

demanding answers from him with her eyes visibly tearful. Afterwards, Snow White apologizes

for her moment of "weakness":

> SNOW WHITE I apologize for the *waterworks* in there. That wasn't very *professional*
> of me.
> BIGBY Nothing to apologize for. I *expected* it to happen sooner.
> …
> Why don't you let *me* handle things from now on?
> SNOW WHITE Not a chance. I had my *one* loss of composure. You won't have to
> worry about further *emotional* fits from me.
> BIGBY Don't beat upon yourself so much, Snow. Sometimes pitching a *fit* is just the
> right way to interrogate a suspect.[43]

When Bigby "pitches a fit" in the next scene where they question Bluebeard, however, it is not

with tears in his eyes; his emotional outbursts are full of curses, insults, and accusations, his

body violently thrust in Bluebeard's personal space. Even as a child, Bigby channeled his

---

[41] Jameson, "Metacommentary," 15.

[42] Willingham, *Wolves,* 91.

[43] Willingham, *Legends in Exile*, 42-43.

emotional responses into avenues of revenge and hatred, rather than vulnerability. After his mother's death, he was the only one of his litter to remain behind to guard her corpse from the carrion eaters, until he was chased off by the large buzzards, causing him to swear the oath that would result in his becoming monstrous. Witnessing pain only causes Bigby to grow angry, rather than frightful. After forty-four hours of labor, when he "can hear Snow. She's in a *lot* of pain. And at the absolute end of her endurance," Bigby is seen with sweat covering his forehead, his face twisted into a grim frown, his hands transformed into claws actively tearing at the couch on which he sits.[44] Snow White, on the other hand, sees the severed head of her friend, one of the Three Little Pigs, and is pictured with one hand covering her throat, as if to protect it, while the other covers her chest, as if in fear.

At the comic beginnings, Snow White is cast as a highly competent administrator with a powerful and determined personality. This persona, however, is absent in her relationship with Bigby. When first investigating Rose Red's murder scene, Snow White attempts to take charge of the investigation, prompting Bigby to order her to shut up, going further to tell Jack that "if she opens her mouth *again*, pick her up and carry her back *home*. If she screams or resists, you have my permission to knock her *senseless*."[45] After this affront, she promptly relents, but not until threatening Jack to leave her alone – not Bigby (See Figure 3.2). She has no trouble demonstrating her authority against other men, as she easily controls Prince Charming and Beast. She does not, however, exert power over Bigby until they have become intimate, but even then her power remains within the domestic sphere. Eventually, all of her power is transferred into the domestic, as she voluntarily gives up her public position when she becomes a mother. While

---

[44] Willingham, *The Mean* Seasons, 83.

[45] Willingham, *Legends in Exile*, 23.

a desire to place family over profession is not a sign of weakness, she does make a near fatal mistake directly before being forced to move to the Farm to raise her children. During the campaign against the wooden soldiers, Snow White leads the Fabletown troops in the battle, but makes a damaging decision to set the enemy on fire, not realizing that the enemy is able to continue to fight while aflame. Forced to watch the battle turn against her troops, Snow White becomes despondent until the arrival of Bigby on the battlefield. Single-handedly reversing the tide, Bigby takes control from Snow White and organizes a successful engagement. When she sees Bigby, Snow White screams his name triumphantly, running down several flights of stairs while nine months pregnant, to throw her arms around the giant wolf, stating: "I knew it…I *knew* you'd come in time to save us! You always do! You *always* save me"[46] (See Figure 3.3).

Perhaps the most damning evidence of Snow White's submission to Bigby's authority is the progression of the cover art. On the cover of *Legends in Exile*, Snow White is the only recognizable fable in motion. Attempting to catch up with a subway train, her arms and legs are posed actively running. Her hands clutch a pair of high heels, while she wears a pair of running shoes, evoking the image of the 9-to-5 working woman. Bigby's arm is trapped in the closing doors while trying to help, but her head is tilted towards the audience and away from the man failing to truly offer assistance. This vigorous portrayal reverses in later covers; as Bigby becomes more active, Snow White is shown as less so. *Storybook Love* features a wide-eyed Snow White staring emotionlessly off into the distance. Behind her, nearly three times her size, is Bigby as a wolf, growling in anger at whatever the two of them see. It is not surprising that in this episode, Bigby protects Snow White from a second assassination attempt by Goldilocks, using his "native" knowledge of the natural landscape to outwit the assassin. The next

---

[46] Willingham, *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, 216-217.

collection, *March of the Wooden Soldiers* features a pregnant Snow White, one hand on her belly, the other on the small of her back, with a human Bigby behind and turned away from her, exhaling from his ubiquitous cigarette. This is followed by *The Mean Seasons*, which has Snow White in the foreground, drawn only in black and white, her hands covered by a muff, while six strings fly off into the sky attached to her flying infants. In muted yellows and reds, behind Snow White stands an enormous wolf, pinning a much smaller Frankenstein to the ground, while surrounded by the bleeding corpses of American soldiers. The final episode with the couple on the cover is *Wolves*, which has the classic romance portrait, Snow White with her head tilted back, hand in the hair of her lover, passively receiving a kiss from a descending, dominant Bigby.

I am not attempting to argue that femininity in *Fables* is constructed only through passive acceptance of male authority. Just as there is a heteroglossia of masculine identities, there are also numerous femininities revealed within the text, as demonstrated by the witch Frau Totenkinder, the special operative and spy Cinderella, the anarchist murderer Goldilocks, and the adventurous Rose Red. Instead, I see Snow White as a specific foil to Bigby that assists in the representation of a masculine identity in opposition to a femininity perceived as weak. This is merely one aspect of Bigby's mythic masculinity that remains connected to a wartime ideology that privileges a politically slanted history. As a man, Bigby symbolizes a hypermasculine ideal that limits alternative modes of masculine behavior while systematically questioning the power of women. Moreover, this system supports a "sentimental idealism" where "war [ceases] to be regarded as an inevitable calamity and [becomes] thought of as a kind of rainbow of promise."[47]

---

[47] Burns, *The American Idea of Mission*, 239. In this work, Burns demonstrates how American altered its perception of war from an agent of destruction to a vehicle for Utopianism.

This is especially cogent considering the newest target of the Adversary's forces, the Arabian Homelands. With the current tension between America and Iraq, the portrayal of Baghdad and its citizens ais ripe for critical attention. In *Arabian Nights (and Days)*, the European fables encounter the Arabian fables seeking sanctuary within the "real world." While a full examination lies outside the boundaries of this essay, it is necessary to address the dichotomous presentation of the Arabs within the text. Sinbad, the Arabic hero, is positively portrayed are encouraged to free their slaves, to allow women to unveil themselves, and to adopt the laws of the European Fabletown Charter – the laws of the white fable world. In opposition, the vizier (a political advisor to a Muslim monarch) attempts to assault the Europeans with a genie, literally described as more powerful than a nuclear device, and ends up destroying himself and his cohort through his own machinations. This inclusion of the Middle Eastern mythic community, especially in a comic that has focused strongly on heroics and war, cannot help but imitate contemporary tensions and underscore the important negotiations of American ideology that are reflected within the *Fables* world.
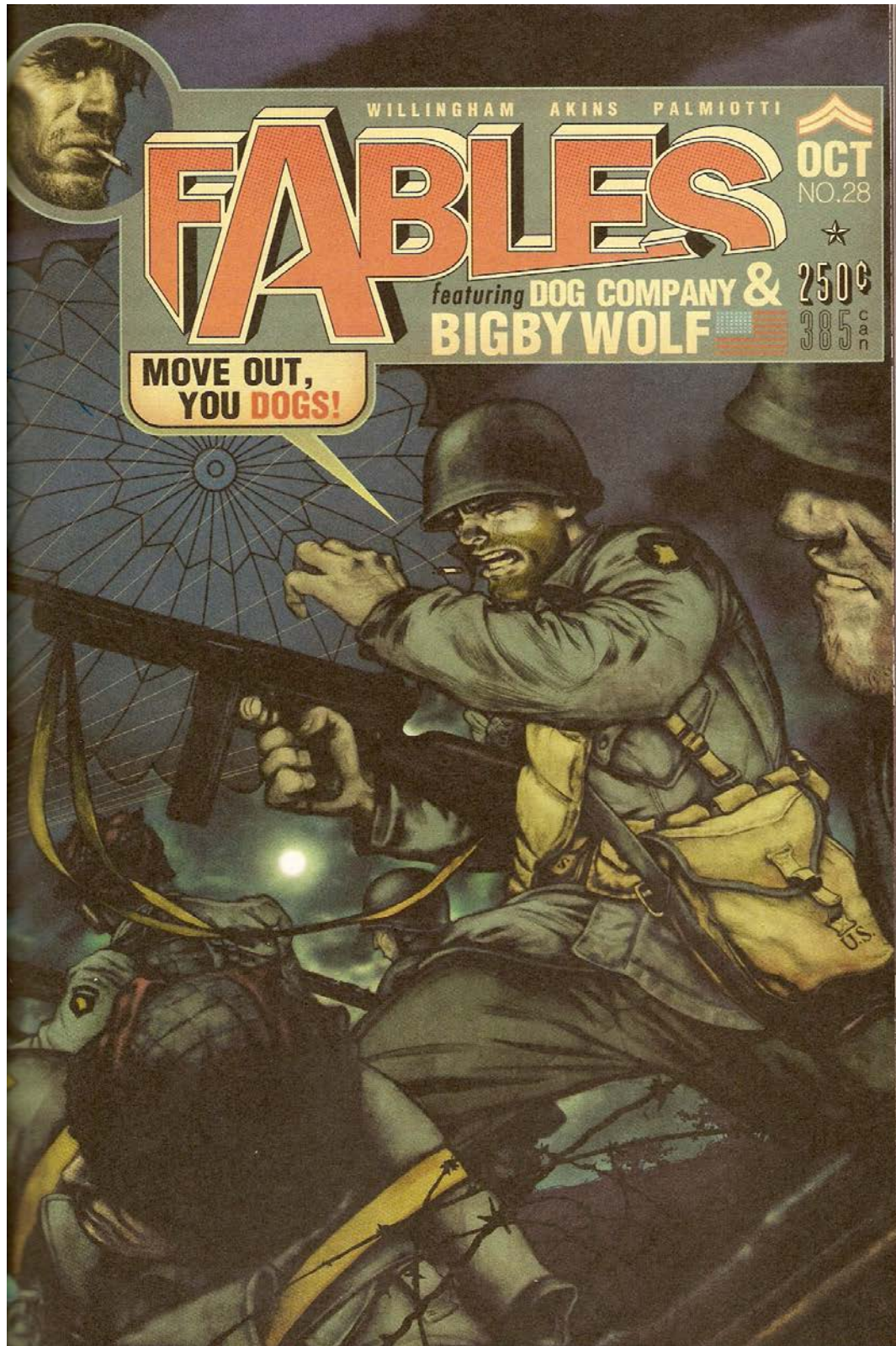
Figure 3.1 – Bigby Wolf as an American soldier circa World War I.

Figure 3.2 – Snow White accepting criticism from Bigby, while putting Jack in his place.

Figure 3.3 – Snow White and her savior – Bigby Wolf.

Chapter 4: "It's 'Cause We're Pardners": The Collision and Collusion of Gender Identity in Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's *Preacher*

Irreverent, brutally violent, over-the-top – *Preacher*, by writer Garth Ennis and artist Steve Dillon, began production in 1995 as part of DC's Vertigo Press imprint, and has earned numerous industry awards, including three Eisners and one Eagle award for Best Writer.[1] Inspired by American westerns, the Scottish born authors set out to create a modern day western saga, melding the two time periods, and in the process, fashioned an outsider's understanding of American history. Ennis defines this period as:

> the American myth originally intended to disguise [its] feisty past…[but] the modern western does not flinch from the horrors of the frontier. Its makers seek to understand what went before, to portray the men and women who made history, warts and all. What began as a whitewash of the past has become a tool to interrogate it. And yet, for all that, the western remains a form of legend. The stories happen long ago and far away, in a land so wild and brutal we cannot imagine it…I can honestly say, with my hand on my heart, that westerns are my favorite.[2]

Their tale follows the life of an American preacher, and is a portrayal of America, "warts and all," through the eyes of foreigners raised on Lee Marvin, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood. These figures, however, have been transformed by contemporary influences of feminine equality, modern day capitalism, and a slasher movie's blood and gore – yet, like *Fables*, still retain many

---

[1] The Eagle Award is the United Kingdom's most prized international award for comics excellence.

[2] Ennis and Dillon, *Ancient History*, 3.

of the conservative ideals of both traditional American comics and the American western narrative.

    Preacher is the story of Jesse Custer, a reverend with a colorful past, who (through no fault of his own) has been infused with the "Word of God," which gives him the power to make anyone who understands him obey his commands. This power comes upon him during a crisis of faith, and Jesse vows to use his new abilities to track down God and make him answer for abandoning his creation to suffering and privation. He is accompanied on his quest by his love interest, Tulip O'Hare, a sensible and competent gun-enthusiast, and Cassidy, an endearing rascal vampire whose century-long history hides numerous betrayals and character defects. The villains of *Preacher* range from the Grail Brotherhood, a global conspiracy to stage the Second Coming of Christ, to a meat-packing tycoon oppressing a small town with his industrial-capitalist ways, to Jesse's own kin who aim to have a real preacher in their family -- if they have to torture him to do it. During his travels, removing the obstacles that God sets in his path, Jesse encounters angels, drug dealers, racist small-town sheriffs, serial killers, and numerous other satirical characters of American folklore and myth.

    The invention of Jesse is greatly influenced by one of America's most enduring mythological symbols – the Western cowboy.[3] In American culture, the cowboy myth is intimately tied to individuality, freedom, and democracy.[4] By incorporating the ideal forms of American identity, the cowboy myth, in essence, casts American viewers as they would like to see themselves – the hero fighting against injustice and tyranny, or better yet, the underdog fighting against overwhelming odds with only truth and confidence as allies. Frequently, the

---

[3] For more information about the creation of mythology and national identity, see Steffan, "Cycles of Myth Restoration," Gleason, "Americans All," or Magelssen, "Remapping American-ness."

[4] Calabrese and Burke, "American Identities," 52-73.

mass media portrays the hero as an outlaw fighting against an unjust government or corrupt land owner, or a modern-day cowboy working to save the purity of the American homestead. Alone and against great odds, the cowboy spends his existence striving for what is right and taking little to no reward or credit for his good deeds – and this position, as an outsider within a foreign culture, might be a reason why the Scottish creators of *Preacher* were such big fans of westerns.[5]

There is more to this legend though than the enjoyable story of the righteous, if small, soldier warring with a powerful, tyrannical enemy. Judith and Andrew Kleinfeld argue:

> [that] the cowboy legend, properly understood, represents what is best about us – spiritedness, energy, courage, competence, a passion for freedom, and an idealistic drive to pursue justice…Americans fell in love with the cowboy as their romantic hero, not industrialists and financiers such as Jay Gould, Rockefeller, and J. P. Morgan, or even the great benefactor who created our national public library system, Andrew Carnegie. The cowboy helped to create what is now one of our largest industries, Hollywood. And the western continued to thrive for more than a half century, shaping our values, aspirations, and fantasies through the fifties and most of the sixties, as classic expressions of cowboy courage were told and retold by our national bards, the filmmakers. The essential story the filmmakers were telling was a narrative of courage and honor, not of greed or mindless violence.[6]

---

[5] Even though the cowboy is an outsider, it still stands as the quintessential American figure, ala John Wayne's portrayal of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers.* See Levy, *John Wayne: Prophet,* or Wills, *John Wayne: The Politics of Celebrity.*

[6] Kleinfield and Kleinfield, "Cowboy Nation," 43-49.

If these traits are the archetype of a "true" American, then it is no surprise that *Shane*, the quintessential cowboy story, and similar movies make up a quarter of the American Film Institute's all time top 100 films**.** And if the cowboy is the quintessential American, then he is also the quintessential American man. Jesse Custer is not only an example of the modern American cowboy, drawing from Western mythology (the outlaw hero, the good sheriff), but also the model of proper masculine behavior. Throughout *Preacher*, all other forms of masculinity identity that does not identify with the cowboy mythology built around Jesse are rejected, and the authors make Jesse more moral, upright, and justified than any of the other male characters in the series.

It follows that the code by which Jesse lives should, then, provide the ideal guide for masculine behavior, and it is suitable that he learns the code from a Vietnam Veteran father named John Custer who received the Purple Heart for walking his wounded best friend through dozens of miles of enemy territory to safety. Jesse's mother, Christina L'Angelle escapes her deranged, Christian family and falls in love with John Custer, but after Jesse is born, they are forced to return to Christina's mother, Marie, at gun point. After repeated attempts to rescue his family, John is shot before Jesse's eyes by Marie's order, but not before his father could impart to him the backbone of the comic's masculine morals: "An' you be a good guy, Jesse. You gotta be like *John Wayne*: you don't take no shit off fools, an' you judge a person by what's in 'em, not how they look. An' you do the *right thing*."[7] These broad guidelines empower Jesse to take egregiously violent actions in the name of doing what is (arguably) just, as the code is not concerned with either legalities or remaining uninvolved. When a person behaves in a way Jesse deems improper, whether it is picking on the weak or religious zealotry, he feels empowered to

---

[7] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World,* 45.

correct the situation in the name of doing "the right thing." It is his father's ethics that guide

Jesse to force a confrontation with God, and it is his visions of John Wayne that hold Jesse to

them – and even pass judgment upon him when he fails to live up to the code.

John Wayne begins appearing to Jesse when he is first placed in an underwater coffin as

punishment for standing up to his grandmother after Jody, the man who murdered his father, also

kills his childhood best friend – Billy-Bob. Standing outside the coffin, John Wayne (whose face

is never completely shown in the comic), says "I know ya must be pretty *scared* in there. Hell, a

fella'd haveta be some kinda…*hero,* not ta be scared where ya are right now…But ya got two

things on yer side, son: Ya got what *yer daddy* said, the night before they shot him…and ya got

me here for ya, just like I tolda ya. If ya kin remember that, pilgrim: you kin get through

anything."[8] John Wayne ignores Jesse when he strays from his father's code, and returns to

chide him during key moral dilemmas, until he returns to the path laid down by John Custer –

which forces Jesse into a confrontation with the Creator he knows will destroy him in a

foolhardy attempt to kill God. Jesse never questions the nature of his visions or doubts his

sanity, but he also never mentions him to those he loves the most; it is as if he knows that John

Wayne is simply a projection of a conscience, his imaginary father figure, his ideal self, or a

combination of all three. John Wayne's inclusion in a comic about America's fascination with

the Western should come as no surprise, as "[for Americans] John Wayne has come to embody

even for his ideological foes the survival of certain vestigial virtues – bravery, loyalty, stoicism

in the face of pain, loss, and even death – in a world reduced to mealy-mouthed relativism."[9]

Decades after his death, he still tops polls of America's favorite movie stars, despite his

---

[8] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 90.

[9] Sarris, forward to *John Wayne: Prophet*, ix.

controversial politics and questionable history with women.[10] John Wayne was the champion of the straightforward westerns, wherein heroes are not capable of family life – they are perpetual outsiders to the ideals they protect. Ethan Edwards from *The Searchers* (1956) might crave a family life, but he turns from it in the end, like the legendary *Shane* (1953).

In Wayne's movies, decisions are traditionally clear cut, with well-defined "bad guys," such as devious cattle ranchers or vicious natives, but these westerns were not the only ones that shaped American identity. As Hollywood became more mature, so did their westerns. Moral decisions faded into a dull gray and anti-heroes like Clint Eastwood's Preacher from *Pale Rider* (1985) challenged earlier mythical ideals of the American West. If Jesse's masculine ideal and conscience are formed by John Wayne's stage presence, then *Preacher's* the Saint of Killers, God's new Angel of Death, is modeled after Clint Eastwood's. It is the differences between Jesse and the Saint of Killers that demonstrates the modern alterations of the cowboy mythology – how America has changed from its conception of its past. The Saint is the stand in for the author's understanding of the American "fiery past" they associate with the bloody, violent history it has covered with the Western myth. This collusion of history and legend is seen as the history of the Saint is revealed in *Ancient History:*

> It was a different time: a time of injuns on the warpath and showdowns in saloons, of
>
> buffalo girls and six-guns, and dying rangers under desert sunsets – and for stories, it was
>
> the greatest time of all. There was William Bonney, who Pat Garrett made twenty-one
>
> forever…Josey Wales, the army of one…Bowie and Crockett and Travis and a hundred
>
> and eighty men, who took the Alamo into history…and Jesse James, who died at the

---

[10] Or perhaps even because of it, as one of the comic's overriding concerns is how men in the mold of their fathers meld with contemporary feminist theories. This issue will be looked at more closely later in the chapter, when Jesse's love interest Tulip is discussed.

hands of a traitor and a coward…and William Munny; who one black night in 1880 was

to scorn a hail of bullets and kill six men, and ride out unscathed from a town too terrified

to face him. It's been so long since then that I no longer know just which of them are

truth. And which are only legends.[11]

A mixture of actor Lee Marvin and character William Munny (from Clint Eastwood's

Unforgiven), the Saint is an amalgamation of fictional and legendary characters, and his

bloodthirsty hatred stands as his most notable trait. Nearly sociopathic in his disregard for

human life -- "and maybe his greatest sin had been that, to regard a man's death so lightly" – he

damns himself through the murder of an innocent, and it is this action that supposedly stands him

apart from the heroic Jesse.[12] The Saint, in his mortal life, was a brutal warleader in the Civil

War, fighting for the South "for no reason he could now recall, other than the same one all men

fought for: because he'd been a damn fool."[13] Moving to the west, he separated himself from the

rest of mankind, killing animals (instead of people) to make his living, until he saved the life of a

kind-hearted Christian woman, who encouraged him to put aside his life of murder, marry her,

and have a daughter.

When God's Archangel of Death grows tired of killing, however, God contrives a series

of events to destroy the Saint's family and set him as the new Archangel of Death. Before he

accepts the task, however, he attempts revenge against the humans responsible for the death of

his wife and, in the process, he commits the murder of an innocent woman. In this murder, "he

damned himself. Utterly. And for all time…that was the moment he damned his soul," but this

---

[11] Ennis and Dillon, *Ancient History*, 8-9.

[12] Ennis and Dillon, *Ancient History*, 67.

[13] Ennis and Dillon, *Ancient History*, 10.

is a mere moment in a life of utter brutality.[14] As *Ancient History* opens, the Saint murders a young man who acts tough, humiliating him in front of the man's peers, which, according to the code of masculine behavior that all of them follow, requires a physical confrontation. Even if the Saint warned the young man away, it is still more murder than self defense.[15] This masculine code adhered to by the Westerns stands for the hyperaggressive masculinity still seen as dominant in the American character. Much like *Fables'* Bigby Wolf, a confident man cannot back away from a direct challenge, especially if that challenge is issued to someone obviously more competent than the challenger.

This model of behavior entitles Jesse to believe that he may take any action necessary in retaliation against those who break his father's code – and just as in the case of the Saint, Jesse feels justified in his actions, regardless of the damage they cause. The only exception is that of the Word of God, a power that Jesse uses repeatedly in anger during the first few months he possesses it, but later feels embarrassed for relying upon it, since it is a talent not wholly his own. After using it to get past a receptionist on his way to confront a corrupt business owner, he chides himself that the "damn thing's like a gun: you pull it out when you got no choice, fine. You stick it in some ol' receptionist gal's face, well, that ain't so good. That ain't my style."[16] He rarely uses the power, and even when he forces men to sodomize themselves with their own firearms or count 3 million grains of sand, he refuses to take advantage of anyone who has not violated his personal sense of justice. Once someone has committed violence upon the weak, insulted a woman, or judged someone by their appearance, however, Jesse has no qualms with committing egregious violent assaults. While Sheriff, he hangs people out three-story windows,

---

[14] Ennis and Dillon, *Ancient History*, 53-54.

[15] See Figure 4.1.

[16] Ennis and Dillon, *Salvation*, 103.

breaks backs, mutilates body parts, and kills those he deems unworthy. Jesse, both for the comic and its audience, is the judge of a person's worth, and if they are found wanting, physical violence is (usually) not far behind. When Jesse first enters Salvation, Texas, he unwittingly reenacts the scene between the Saint of Killers and the boy he murdered, but unlike the Saint of Killers, who remorselessly pulls the trigger after warning the boy to "walk away," Jesse stops at harming him instead of outright killing. This might be seen as a potential difference between our imagined 1880s past and the contemporary 1990s of the comic, as it certainly establishes Jesse as a character who can show restraint. This restraint, however, is rarely shown in the case of *legitimate* threats, encouraging the belief that Americans should physically take out wrath against those who violate a certain code of behavior.

This behavior is understandable for the character, considering the input of the second man who raised him. Jody is a brutal murderer, a Louisiana boy who follows Jesse's deranged grandmother Marie L'Angelle. Tied to a chair after being kidnapped with Tulip, Jesse states that Jody's family "been servin' my gran'ma's family since time meant shit….but Jody….way I figure it, he maybe got fucked *bad* when he was little. Like in the womb. 'Cause Jody is now the *leading expert* on fucking people over before they can fuck him. He's strong as shit, born mean, got a real *intelligence* gleamin' in them eyes…"[17] In accordance with Marie L'Angelle's will, Jody kills Jesse's father, attempts to kill Jesse's mother, and shoots Tulip before Jesse's eyes. These vicious acts are only the beginning of years of abuse Jesse experienced at his hands, including Jody's nailing Jesse's dog to a tree after it humped his leg and breaking Jesse's arm to teach him to stand up for himself. In the deranged mind of Jody, all of this was done to make Jesse into a man, or as Jody states "[your father is] the reason you turned out so goddamned *soft,*

---

[17] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 41.

you stupid fuck! You been mine, I'd'a kicked your faggotty little ass good an' regular…why you think we gave you such a hard time growin' up here, boy? Trynna *toughen you up*."[18] Right after this declaration, Jesse bites a large chunk out of Jody's arm, kicks him to the ground, breaks his back -- all Jody can say is "Prouda you, boy," and he maintains a proud smile while Jesse strangles him to death.[19] While this could be considered Jesse straying from his father's code to become more like Jody, a vicious killer, Jesse did just watch his girlfriend's murder and is unaware that God had resurrected her for his own purposes – killing Jody is the only way Jesse can "take no shit off fools," as Jody knows no other way to exert control.

With Jody as a surrogate father figure, Jesse's tendency to physical violence is no surprise, but unlike Jody, Jesse rarely suffers any sanctions for his various assaults. When he breaks the law while acting as the Sheriff of Salvation, he neither loses his position, nor is fined for throwing an old man through a window or publicly threatening to kill him. After stopping an act of pedophilia, he beats Jesus de Sade nearly to death and forces a man to eat his own gun, destroying his teeth and lower jaw in the process. Because these men violated his father's code, Jesse is cast as a champion for his excessive violence. The characters that Jesse is based upon, the western heroes played by John Wayne, would knock a man down or kill him, but they rarely resorted to torture. This alteration in the characterization points to a contemporary American belief – actions that break our moral code justify any retaliatory penalties we feel necessary, up to and including mutilation, torture, and cold-blooded murder. In the last few decades, there has been a marketed difference in the violence an American action hero is permitted to display on film. In the 1980s, the decade where the action hero is first encoded, in movies such as Ted Kotcheff's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987), or John

---

[18] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 123.

[19] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 125.

McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), the protagonist is only entitled to kill his enemy either during a time of war or when the villain is perceived as a direct threat. In the last few years, however, action *heroes* have committed violent acts of murder on unarmed "bad guys," while escaping negative consequences, as seen in Antoine Fuqua's *Shooter* (2007) – where Mark Wahlberg's veteran Marine shoots both a US Senator and his accountant when the American legal system fails to punish them for their crimes. Jesse Custer is another representative of this break in "perceived justification," and feels no guilt for brutally murdering anyone who he believes has failed to live "like a man should."

Jesse and the Saint of Killers are by far not the only characters to feel no guilt for their horrific actions against others; Herr Starr, the comic's main mortal antagonist, seeks to lock the world in perpetual stasis and is willing to sacrifice anyone to achieve his goal. Starr is introduced as the servant of the Grail, a global conspiracy whose purpose is to guard the living descendants of Jesus Christ, who for the past several centuries, have been kept in cages and interbred so much that the latest "Blood of the Lamb" has the mentality of a perpetual, spoiled two year old. The Grail, through influence, intimidation, and blackmail, pulls the strings for all of the world's leaders, and its (quite insane) purpose is to use this influence to force nuclear fallout in the year 2000. In the aftermath of global apocalypse, they plan to use the living child of Christ as a flashpoint to spark global conversion to Christianity, in order to bring about worldwide peace. As part of this organization, Starr serves first as the Grail's Executioner and then as patriarchal and facist leader – the Allfather. He is obsessed by the possibility of a world of logical order, where random acts of violence and hatred are eliminated as the populace, obsessed with religious zeal, meekly follows commands. Unlike the rest of the Grail's members, Starr possesses no personal faith, and only seeks to use the organization's resources to create a

controlled population, but his continual attempts to stagnate change take a toll on him, both physically and mentally.

In his attempt to take over the Grail and replace the inbred child of Christ with Jesse Custer, a man with the Word of God, Starr's body deteriorates. He begins with a stylized scar around his destroyed right eye, a wound cut into him as a child (which, it is hinted, began his hunger for an ordered existence), but ends with a serious of more brutal disfigurements. Jesse cuts another scar into his head, humorously making his bald head into the shape of an erect penis, Tulip shoots off his left ear, cannibals eat his right leg, and a Doberman entirely castrates him. As his body is slowly imposed upon, Starr grows increasingly insane, and he begins to ignore his vision in order to seek vengeance against Jesse Custer. He sacrifices nearly the entirety of the Grail, its forces, and a U.S. Army squadron of tanks and helicopters; he even authorizes a nuclear strike on U.S. soil. As his body degrades, so does his masculine "authority," as demonstrated in his increasingly degrading acts (he starts by humiliating his female partners, and eventually he humiliates himself) he must commit to receive sexual completion.[20] While Starr disintegrates both physically and mentally (until, finally, Tulip kills him), Jesse (his opposite) continually regenerates in his attempts to remove an oppressive overlord from existence. God has put all of the comic's action in motion for His own egotistical amusement; God's purpose is a narcissistic "game" where He creates a force powerful enough to destroy Him (Jesse Custer the "Word of God"), but then attempts to wins its love instead. Jesse, like Herr Starr, is disfigured during God's game, but unlike Starr, Jesse's body is continually renewed. God resurrects Jesse twice, once returning an eye that He had bitten out for Jesse's offenses, and while God performs these acts for his own twisted goals, Jesse does not suffer the physical

---

[20] For further information on male bodies reinforcing inscription of masculinity, see Jeffords *Revealing Bodies*, particularly McIlvenny, "The Disabled Male Body."

77

degeneration of Starr – he physically remains the "whole" masculine figure that "powerful" men like Starr cannot attain. Starr's masculinity is removed from him, both literally and figuratively, which calls attention to his failure to act as a proper man – while Jesse is ever young, fit, and strong.

Jesse, however, is not the only character who manages to regenerate wounds, as his "best friend," the vampire Cassidy, is also capable of healing himself from anything but death-by-sunlight. When Ennis set out to tell his Western, he knew that he wanted the best friend to be a genuine "rogue," and Cassidy certainly fits the bill. The most complicated character in the comic, Cassidy begins his life at the beginning of the 20th Century fighting the English as he believes a good Irish patriot should. In *Proud Americans*, the reader learns the first half of Cassidy's life – how his brother shielded the inept and foolish Cassidy from killing himself in the name of patriotism, and how he was turned into a vampire as the brothers escaped the slaughter at Dublin in 1916. In order to hide from his family, he travels across the Atlantic to New York City. Cassidy tells Jesse this origin story, making it seem like a wonderful myth of a foreigner falling for America, and Cassidy casts himself as a benighted youth who seeks redemption. It isn't until years later, near the end of the comic, that Jesse learns the truth of his best friend -- Cassidy is a parasite on his friend's lives, a cycle that has continued since his first arrival in the United States. When life is good, he lives off of his friend's largesse, making sure everyone has a good time, but he always eventually spirals into sexual affairs and heavy drug use. He has turned more than one woman into a prostitute in order to get money to feed their mutual addictions, but only after he turns the girl into an addict in the first place. He "falls in love" with his best friend's girlfriends, always with disastrous consequences. Superhumanly strong, he bruises, mutilates, and kills the women he is involved with when his temper rises, and all of these

behaviors he hides behind his friendly façade. His greatest personal betrayal to Jesse, however, is his treatment of Tulip after Jesse's death (before God resurrects him). Jesse's last words are of her, and Cassidy hides that from Tulip in order to feed her growing addiction to alcohol and pain killers. Tulip was aware of Cassidy's desire for her even before Jesse died, and she begins sleeping with him afterwards in order to punish herself for her perceived failure to Jesse.

Cassidy's portrayal is a reminder of the abuse towards women that spurred the feminist waves in a fight for equality.   With this in mind, it is appropriate that Cassidy is a vampire, both in that he feeds off of others to continue his existence, and that he lives in a continuous cycle of dependence and abuse on women that drains them of their lives. In many ways, Cassidy is a twisted reflection of Jesse's struggle with his father's rules and how to view women. While the first two elements of the code "don't take no shit off fools, an' you judge a person by what's in 'em, not how they look" are relatively easy to translate into the modern world, it is the commandment to do the right thing that Jesse struggles with – especially in relation to women. Raised on John Wayne era westerns, Jesse deeply believes that a man must ensure that women should not be endangered, threatened, or attacked, and Cassidy is a rejection of that core belief. In their final scene together, Jesse confronts Cassidy with all of the vampire's sins, using the Word of God to force the superhuman creature into a fight him – a fight Jesse easily wins (demonstrating, once more, his superior qualities). After receiving a vicious beating and a list of his various offenses, Cassidy lashes out at Jesse, demanding "who the fuck are you to judge me," to which Jesse responds, with hatred in his eyes, "Why, I'm just the son of a bitch never beat up no woman, Cass."[21] As Figure 4.2 shows, the focus of this action is Jesse, whose moral outrage is centered in the panels, leaving the abuse Cassidy suffers off "screen." Even his suffering isn't worthy of viewer's attention – he must be *completely* rejected.

---

[21]Ennis and Dillon, *Alamo,* 172. Figure 4.2.

Rejecting Cassidy is inevitable to the masculine code he follows, but it is when the code confronts the ideology of second and third wave feminism that it begins to collapse. As part of "do the right thing," Jesse believes that he is incapable of allowing a woman to confront dangerous situations. While this is seemingly gentlemanly, the rhetoric is based in a belief that woman are incapable of handling those problems. In his first attempt to leave Tulip behind so he can face the upcoming dangers alone, the two fight, and he says:

> Seems to me there's somethin' you don't know about men, an' that's that we can't help this shit. I mean, I dunno if it's genetic or ift's to do with what we get taught, or if it's just 'cause it's expected of us – but it's what we *do*, okay? 'cause to help a girl when she's in trouble, or stop her getting' into trouble, is just the right goddamned thing to do. An' I *know* you're as smart as me, an' as capable, an' my equal at just about everything – I know you're *empowered*, or whatever the hell you call it – but I swear, I even think of a single hair on your head getting' harmed an' all that bullshit goes right out the fuckin' window.[22]

This belief serves as the central argument between Jesse and Tulip, as Tulip sees this rhetoric as inherently sexist, and while Jesse agrees with her, he still continues to abandon her when he faces danger. While he admits to having read about feminism when he "needed somethin' to brighten up my hangovers back in Annville" and knowing enough to prefer "Germaine Greer over that Dworkin woman," he still can't apply that "book" knowledge to his life.[23] His father's rules are too strongly ingrained.[24]

---

[22] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 251.

[23] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 251.

[24] Germaine Greer and Andrea Dworkin are both pivotal spokesman for Feminism who were first noticed in the 1970s. Dworkin has, unfairly, been linked with attacks against heterosexuality, and has developed a reputation as

Jesse can understand fighting alongside a companion – it is the reason he goes after Cassidy when the vampire is captured, and the reason why John Wayne continues to appear to Jesse even after he disappoints the figment. John Wayne dresses Jesse down for following his family's desires, and when Jesse confesses to quitting on his father's beliefs, he asks why John Wayne won't quit on him, to which Wayne cries out, "Dern it, Pilgrim. It's 'cause we're pardners."[25] This idea of "pardners" defines Jesse's relationship to other men, and it is that connection that Tulip desires to have with the man she loves. Pardners won't shirk their duties or quit before the job is finished, and if they should die, it is considered an honored loss at the hero's side. Before he leaves her to face Herr Starr and God for the last time, Jesse laments, "I told her I trusted her. I said I knew she could handle herself, I didn't think her as no weak little girl – hell, I don't…How come doin' right an' shootin' straight's so easy, except when it comes to how you deal with women?"[26] In this scene, John Wayne responds with understanding, but that understanding from a pardner does not allow Tulip to forgive Jesse after the mission is through. Once his enemies are defeated, Jesse finds himself surprisingly alive, and returns to Tulip's side to start a life with her – a life which she rejects, until he makes a confession:

> What we have ain't born of reason or logic 'cause love *never* is…But I do know that I
> have got to change a little, if this macho bullshit you talked about is gonna keep gettin' in
> the way. We don't gotta just accept the way things are. Just like we don't gotta let
> ourselves be lessened by death or any other damn thing. Just like we don't need no *God*
> to shape the world for us. *We* can make our lives the way we want them – or we ain't

---

anti-masculinity. For more information on their seminal texts, see Dworkin, *Pornography,* or Greer, *The Female Eunuch.*

[25] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 99.

[26] Ennis and Dillon, *Alamo*, 121-122.

worth nothing. Now take my hand an' I swear I'll love you 'til the goddamn stars go

out.[27]

After noticing the tears in his eyes, the first tears he has cried since his father's death, Tulip

accepts Jesse back into her life, with the belief that Jesse has finally set aside the "macho

bullshit" that prevented her from being both his love interest and his pardner. This moment,

however, does not occur until the most trying and dangerous moments of Jesse's life (taking on

God) are complete, so could serve as what Fredric Jameson sees as a "treasure-censor," where

the dominant regime seems to be undercut, but in a way that does not challenge its authority.[28]

Jesse will accept Tulip as a strong partner, in all meanings of the word, but only after the real

dangers have passed. This is, ultimately, undercuts the most compelling, transgressive argument

of the comic – that men can accept women as equal "pardners." If Jesse's struggle to

acknowledge the competency of women is a mirror to the same struggle for American men, then

it demonstrates a failure to fully recognize women's authority, aptitudes, and abilities.

This struggle can be seen in Tulip's characterization, as she is a strong woman in an age

of post-feminism. Strong-willed, powerful, capable, she struggles to achieve acknowledgement

of her obvious strengths, and this fight is emphasized by the obstacles her father has in raising

her. In *All Hell's A-Coming*, after finally extricating herself from the drug-filled stupor

encouraged by Cassidy, Tulip's childhood, which has shaped her into the confident, passionate,

sharpshooter who meets Jesse in a bar in Texas when she is eighteen, is finally revealed. Her

mother dies in childbirth, leaving the ultra-masculine Jake O'Hare, who scoffs at the wimpy

friend who suggests he might have a girl, clueless about how to raise a daughter. Convinced by a

---

[27] Ennis and Dillon, *Alamo,* 207.

[28] Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, 16.

sympathetic nurse to stop avoiding his new child, Jake holds baby Tulip in his hands, becomes enchanted with her, and pronounces that "Aw hell. So you're a girl. That needn't be so bad."[29] The next panel has a five-year old Tulip cleaning a snub-nosed revolver as her father sights a high-powered rifle, while he convinces his daughter that she needs to go to school to learn about democracy, republics, "how we live free from tyranny an' oppression," and about communists – who want to take their guns from them.[30] Jake's desires to have his daughter "free from tyranny" end up confusing his conservative friends; when Tulip is not allowed to play on the baseball team, he complains, "I tell you boys: if a girl can't do the things she wants 'cause of some stupid rules, if she ain't got the same choices fellas do – hell, if we ain't got real, genuine equality between the sexes – then there is always gonna be somethin' seriously wrong with this great country of ours."[31]   Tulip is a combination of her father's right-wing rhetoric and growing understanding of the aims of feminism, but what is also apparent is her desire to find a partner as accepting, strong, and loving as her father, and the reasons for her anger when Jesse deserts her to handle life-threatening problems on his own.

Tulip's creation is a definite attempt to fashion a comic book heroine as something more than an overdeveloped body of adolescent male fantasies or as a victim of violence.[32] This is not to say that Tulip's appearance is not used for titillation, as her body is placed on display in various states of undress; these moments, however, are frequently used to partially upset

---

[29] Ennis and Dillon, *All Hell's A-Coming*, 23.

[30] Ennis and Dillon, *All Hell's A-Coming*, 24.

[31] Ennis and Dillon, *All Hell's A-Coming,* 27.

[32] The American comics industry has come under attack repeatedly for misogynism. For more details, Lopes, *Demanding Respect.* A particularly interesting example of this trend is found in Gail Simone's widely popular internet list of comic heroines and supporting characters who were victims of violence, "Women in Refrigerators," named for Green Lantern's discovery of his girlfriend mutilated and stuffed into his fridge.

conservative views of heterosexual power dynamics. In *Dixie Fried*, when Tulip and Jesse reunite after he leaves her to rescue Cassidy from the All Father (after promising to fight with her by his side), Tulip is shown in black lingerie, complete with thigh highs and garters, while she seduces Jesse. Once she strips him naked, giving the audience the same view of his body as hers, she convinces him to give up power, allowing her to handcuff him, after which she promptly leaves him for several hours. This moment could be seen as an attack upon feminine empowerment, as she takes advantage of that power once she possesses it, except that later in that issue, Jesse willingly takes on the submissive role again, allowing himself to be handcuffed during sexual play, after the two of them have a conversation about trust and the abuse of that trust. Again, we see Jesse undressed, but Tulip remains fully clothed, removing her as the sexualized object during the scene.[33] Throughout most of the comic, Tulip wears utilitarian clothing, t-shirts, jackets, and jeans, and the few times she does appear topless, it is next to Jesse, whose body is similarly on display. There is the occasional cover art that heightens her sexualized performance, as found in Figure 4.3, but these are rare, and Tulip is much more likely to be seen blazing away with a gun in her hand, wearing practical, utilitarian gear.

Her marksmanship skills are notable, as she has known how to care for and handle guns since she was a little girl. Like Jesse, she has no problem with killing those who she feels have violated her code of conduct, but her code only allows for killing in self defense. She fails an assassination attempt that would remove her debts to a loan shark, and when rescuing her best friend from a gang rape, she intimidates the assailants with a shotgun rather than murdering them. When events force her hand, however, she is merciless to those who attempt to harm her and Jesse, matching him in his ferocity when they are armed. In the last fight with Starr, she

---

[33] Ennis and Dillon, *Dixie Fried*, 81.

guns down one of his minions who throws his weapon down in hopes that she will spare him from her wrath, crying out "Who *is* this woman?"[34] Rarely does she need rescuing, and, when she does, it is because she is outgunned by serious firepower, and these occasions happen no more than they do for the other two main characters. It is not women who need saving, but friends who get in over their heads, regardless of the gender of those friends. Tulip gets herself out of as many problematic situations, saving herself from Cassidy's drug induced seductions when she thinks Jesse is dead, so she is far from a damsel in distress.   Beautiful, confident, clever, and capable, Tulip is a strong model of a powerful, independent woman.

Cindy is in many ways similar to Tulip, and if Jesse's interests serve as the interest of the intended reader, she is the only other female character that seriously tempts him – and therefore us. There are some surface differences between the two women, Cindy lacks the whimsical, carefree attitude that Tulip possesses during her and Jesse's early relationship, but Cindy is still the most intelligent and capable woman other than Tulip in the comic. Hired on as the token black deputy in Salvation, Texas, Cindy is disgruntled when Jesse is illegally promoted as Sheriff within days of his arrival, but in the manner of 1973's *Walking Tall* and its many remakes, she is quickly won over by his dedication to justice. Unlike Tulip, she adheres to the letter of the law, and she frequently argues with Jesse about his tactics, finally convincing him to handle the problems of the town legally. Cindy's purpose seems to be to fulfill Jesse's father's second requirement, that you judge a person by their character, rather than their appearance. In this, Cindy's insertion in the comic is naïve: there is no real substantive difference between the two women, even though they are of different racial backgrounds.   Cindy is little more than Tulip with a badge and darker skin, and her race provides little to the comic other than a subplot involving white supremacists, where Jesse can, of course, verbally and physically assault

---

[34] Ennis and Dillon, *Alamo*, 168.

members of the Ku Klux Klan. While Jesse is seen to be tempted by Cindy's character, it is the temptation of a single second, and one which he instinctively pulls away from – even though he is aware that Tulip believes him to be dead and is sleeping with Cassidy.

Aside from these two characters, the other women of *Preacher* continue the traditional portrayal of women as victims to the whims of others. All of the other supporting female characters fall short of Tulip's independence, for one reason or another. Jesse's mother Christine manages to become a strong woman after finally escaping her mother's deranged control, but she is unable to prevent her husband's death, her son's childhood abuses, or the threat that the tyrant Quincannon represents to her new home in Salvation, Texas. Lorie (a childhood friend of Jesse's) lacks cleverness, and Featherstone (Herr Starr's "gal Friday"), both capable and intelligent, lacks the confidence to declare her desires for her boss's affections. Tulip's best friend Amy, perhaps, most underscores the problem of Ennis and Dillon's creation. Like Tulip, she is beautiful, and with Tulip's assistance, learns how to take care of herself. She is fun and entertaining, but her tragedy is that she is alone, and when she appears on the page, the lack of a successful relationship nearly bleeds off the page. She is open about her admiration of Jesse and her envy of their relationship, and when we last see her in the continuity of the comic, she is holding herself tightly in the snow, watching Jesse and Tulip drive away, whispering "I wish I was going with you. I wish I was one of you. Either one."[35] Amy's desperate craving only further demonstrates the comics adherence to traditional gendered portrayals – specifically, as an example of the compulsory heterosexuality supported within the comic.

Every eligible character is judged by their ability to find a partner of the opposite gender, and homosexuals are insultingly portrayed. All sexual identities outside of the heteronormative

---

[35] Ennis and Dillon, *All Hell's A-Coming*, 198.

pairing are depicted as obscene, and they are frequently linked with degrading or criminal acts, such as rape, pedophilia, or rampant drug use. Comic relief characters Bob Glover and Freddy Allen call themselves "sexual investigators," but they serve as both male prostitutes and hired thugs for anyone with enough money. Heavy-set, with a "cop's mug," Bob's one pride is that even though he's a male prostitute, he's "never let another man's John Thomas pass [his] lips, not once," calling into question his own acceptance of his sexuality.[36] While on a roadtrip with Jesse, Bob proudly tells the story of coming out to his father, but his pride comes from the beating he received and the independence of his spirit, rather than his sexual identity.[37] Freddy assumes the duties of their profession that Bob refuses, and his physical description is a reflection of this status – he is short, wears glasses, and sports a pencil-thin mustache, or in short, is reminiscent of the traditional depiction of "weak" homosexuality during the 1950s-1970s. Both of them are bunglers and rarely do they achieve their ends, and even if they are not overtly offensive (when Bob rapes Starr, he believes he has been paid for willing, rough sex), their depiction and hesitancy about their own sexuality is not positive.

The most perverse figure in *Preacher* is Bob and Fred's first employer, Jesus de Sade, a figure who represents the perceived lechery and wanton abandonment ascribed to a morally bankrupt, privileged social elite. While introducing himself to Jesse, the comic's moral center, Jesus defends his party and his lifestyle, stating:

> We in the Gomorrah People are interested primarily in physical gratification; in smashing
>
> through the boundaries of base and boring everyday society. In tasting of forbidden fruit,
>
> and *luxuriating* in our defiance of an old, defeated God…I suppose the real reason we do

---

[36] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 158.

[37] Ennis and Dillon, *All Hell's A-Coming,* 69.

this is *excess*: its singular pursuit, almost as an end itself. These revelers are the people's

heroes and masters. Their posts require ambition and energy all *way above* the norm, or

else they would never have climbed so high. Their outlets for release are – naturally,

therefore – excessive.[38]

Pasty skinned, lacking defined musculature, Jesus de Sade is drawn as an effeminate, wasted

Jesus Christ, which lends to the comic's anti-religious overtones. The issues dedicated to de

Sade's party have the most instances of homosexuality, and those moments are peppered with

pedophilia, bestiality, sadomasochism, cocaine, and heroin. Were there other portrayals of a

loving, sane non-heteronormative relationship, the homosexuality seen in the de Sade issues

could be ignored, but every other instance is equally undercut -- the most damning of which is

Cassidy's ultimate betrayal. Once Jesse learns of Cassidy's treatment of Tulip after the

helicopter incident, Jesse hunts down the truth about Cassidy's first few decades in the United

States. Through a series of conversations with an old bag lady who was a friend of Cassidy in

her youth, the reader is given glimpses of increasingly greater betrayals that Cassidy had

committed. When Jesse confronts Cassidy, he is mostly concerned with Cassidy's physical

assault on multiple women – breaking John Custer's code of conduct. This is not the final

reveal, however, for the reader. The last surprise, at the bottom of the slowly developing spiral

of immoral acts, is the revelation that Cassidy received drug money for performing fellatio on his

dealer for a hit. This moment of homosexuality is equivocated to beating and murdering women

for all its narrative emphasis.[39] There Cassidy kneels, his body bent forward, his hand lifted to

both shield his mouth and to clean it off, with a look of shame apparent on his face, visible even

---

[38] Ennis and Dillon, *Until the End of the World*, 203-204.

[39] See Figure 4.4.

though he wears his perpetual sunglasses. In this panel, Cassidy has revealed his "weakness" to the audience, and has become nothing more than a "faggot," the derisive term John Wayne uses to insult Jesse when the preacher had disappointed him the most.

As this comic seems continually interested in the disappointment of father figures, it is essential to examine *Preacher's* characterization of the ultimate father figure, God. Juvenile, thrill-seeking, and insecure, God sets up the entire plot of *Preacher* to satisfy an immature desire for unconditional worship through creating a force that could destroy Him and attempting to garner its love through Job-esque trials.   He encourages an angel and a demon to mate and ensures that the offspring seeks out a human host – instilling it with the Word of God. God spends most of the comic hiding away from Heaven and creation while contriving events to turn Jesse to his worship, while occasionally appearing to Jesse and his confidants with promises of forgiveness and eternal love. After Tulip is murdered by Jody, He resurrects her with an appeal to turn Jesse to His worship. It is when God appears to Jesse to demand his love, however, that the comic's version of God is truly revealed. Appearing to Jesse in His glorious light, he states: "Rejoice. For you who were lost are found again. You who stood at the gates of death are saved by most merciful hand. You, my son," to which Jesse replies, "I ain't your Goddamn son."[40] In the scene that follows, God continues to demonstrate His failure to understand contemporary humanity, as He believes that by saving Jesse's woman, He would earn his eternal love. As could be expected by anyone not wrapped up in their own personal glory, Jesse continues to reject God's love and forgiveness, until God snaps, demanding what Jesse would not give willingly and tearing out his eye in anger. [41]   What He is incapable of seeing, thus demonstrating that the God of *Preacher* is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, is that His other creation, the

---

[40] Ennis and Dillon, *Salvation*, 203.

[41] See Figures 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7.

Saint of Killers, is granted the ability to kill anything – including God Himself. Working together, Jesse and the Saint of Killers devise a trap to lure God back to Heaven after dealing with Jesse, only to walk straight into the guns of the Saint – who ends the comic sitting on the Throne of Heaven as the story ends. *Preacher* kills off the metaphorical father figure and the vindictive, attention-hungry, malicious, and puerile antics of past adult models that He represents. Where God demands, Jesse's and Tulip's fathers lead by example, and provide the comic's model for proper fatherhood. This is further evidenced by the number of individual issues dedicated to these important figures and the influence they have upon their children – after all, Jesse wants to be his father, and Tulip ultimately chooses Jesse because he possesses every good quality of her father. It could be argued that when Jesse rejects the "macho bullshit" that has prevented him from happiness with Tulip, he is rejecting the lessons of the father figure, but it is more likely that Jesse merely seeks to redefine the third clause of his father's code – "do the right thing."

He isn't rejecting what he sees as proper behavior; instead, he is refusing to accept that treating women as less than full partners is correct. This acceptance, however, does not arrive until nearly too late – and perhaps that is why *Preacher* stands as a transitional comic for gender portrayal, rather than a truly progressive one. Jesse accepts that women can be capable, but too late to allow her to undergo the same dangerous trials he feels he must, thus maintaining traditional notions of masculine authority. And ultimately, Tulip accepts his form of authoritative masculinity, as she ends the comic returning to Jesse's side, sitting behind him on his horse and forgiving him for betraying her twice.[42]

---

[42] See Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.1 – The Saint of Killers preparing to gun down a foolish boy goaded into confronting an experienced soldier.

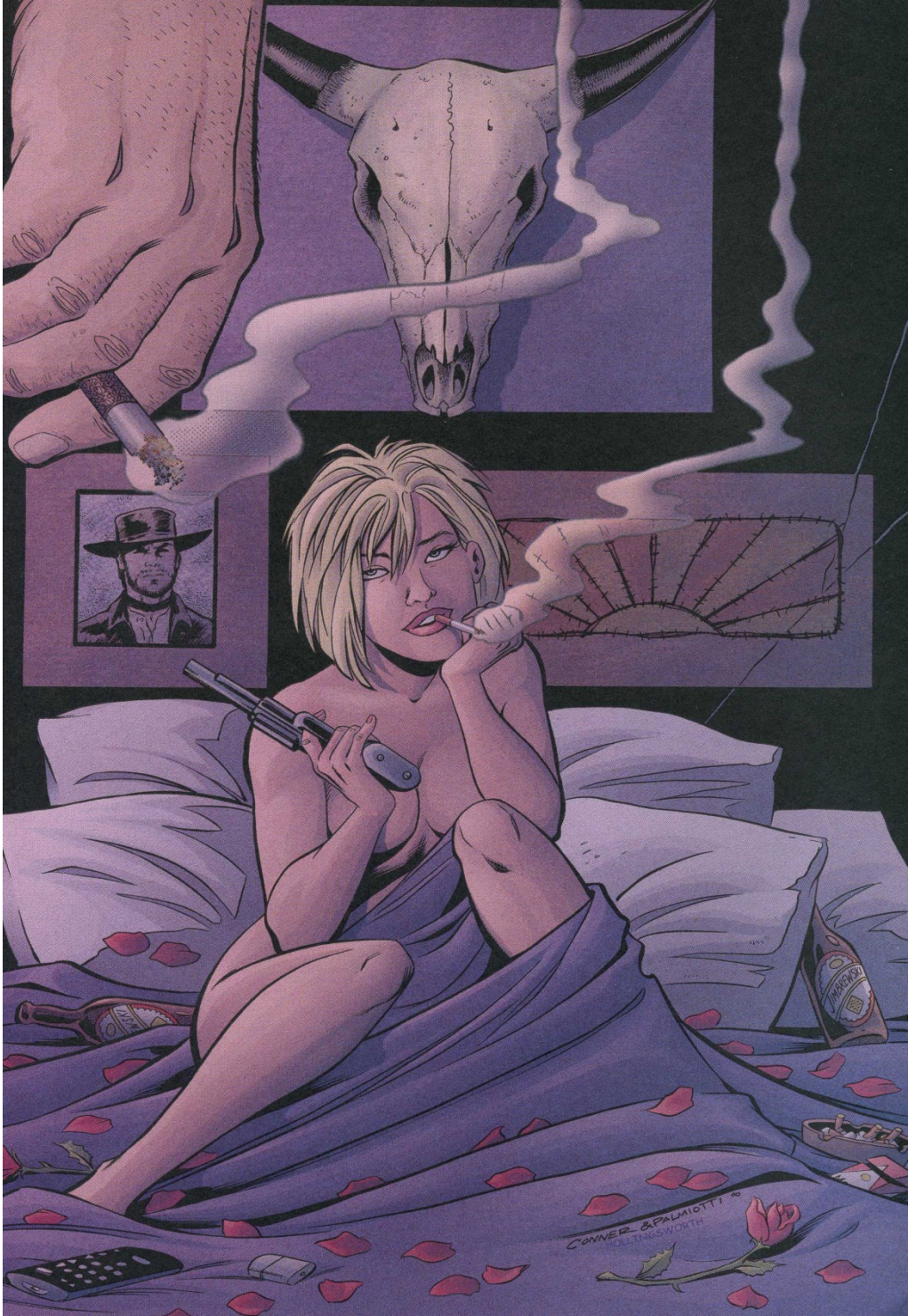Figure 4.2 – Jesse physically taking out his wrath on Cassidy.

Figure 4.3 – One of the rare moments where Tulip is portrayed as a "cheesecake" pinup without Jesse's nude form also revealed.

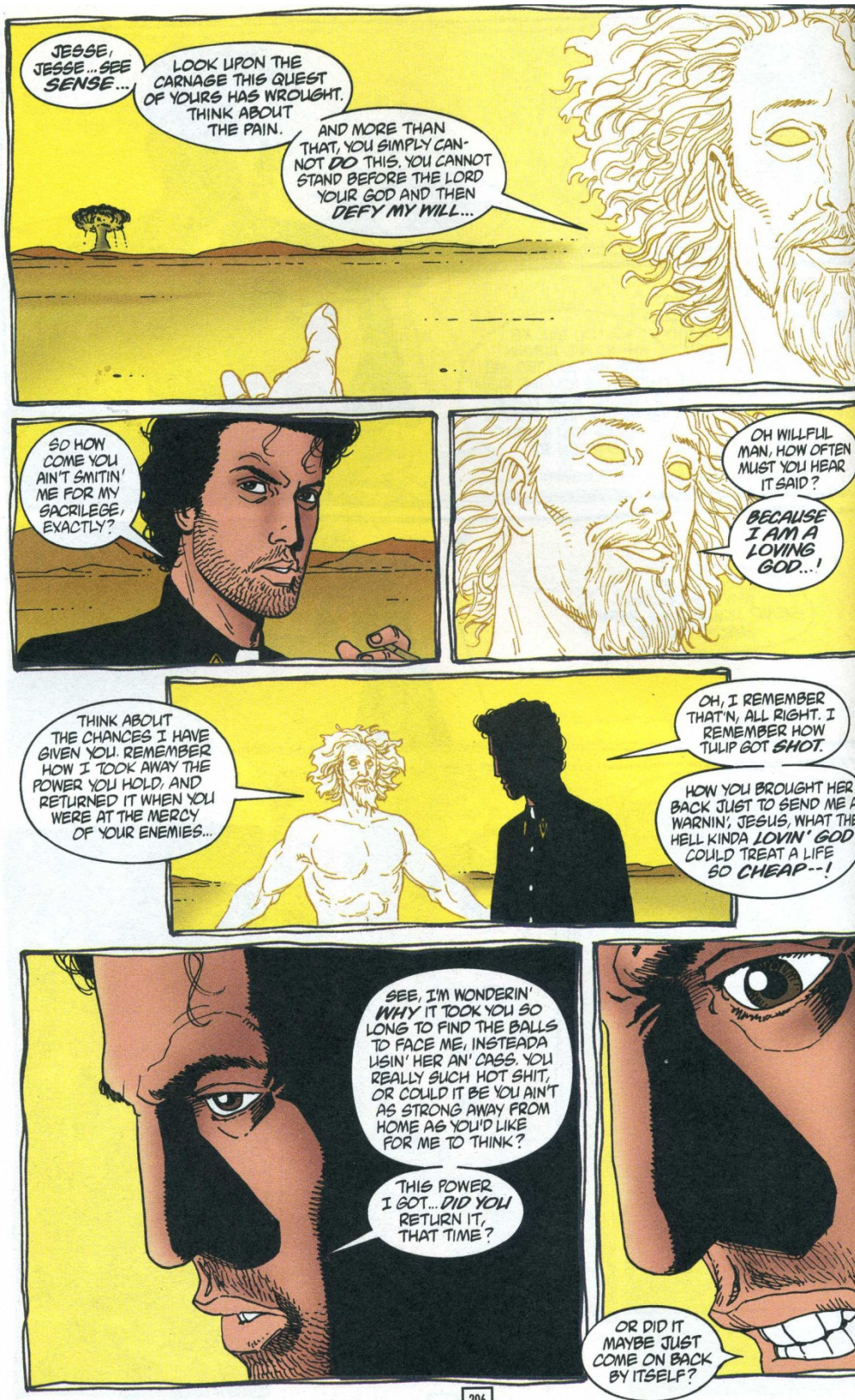Figure 4.4 – Cassidy's "fall" into homosexuality revealed.
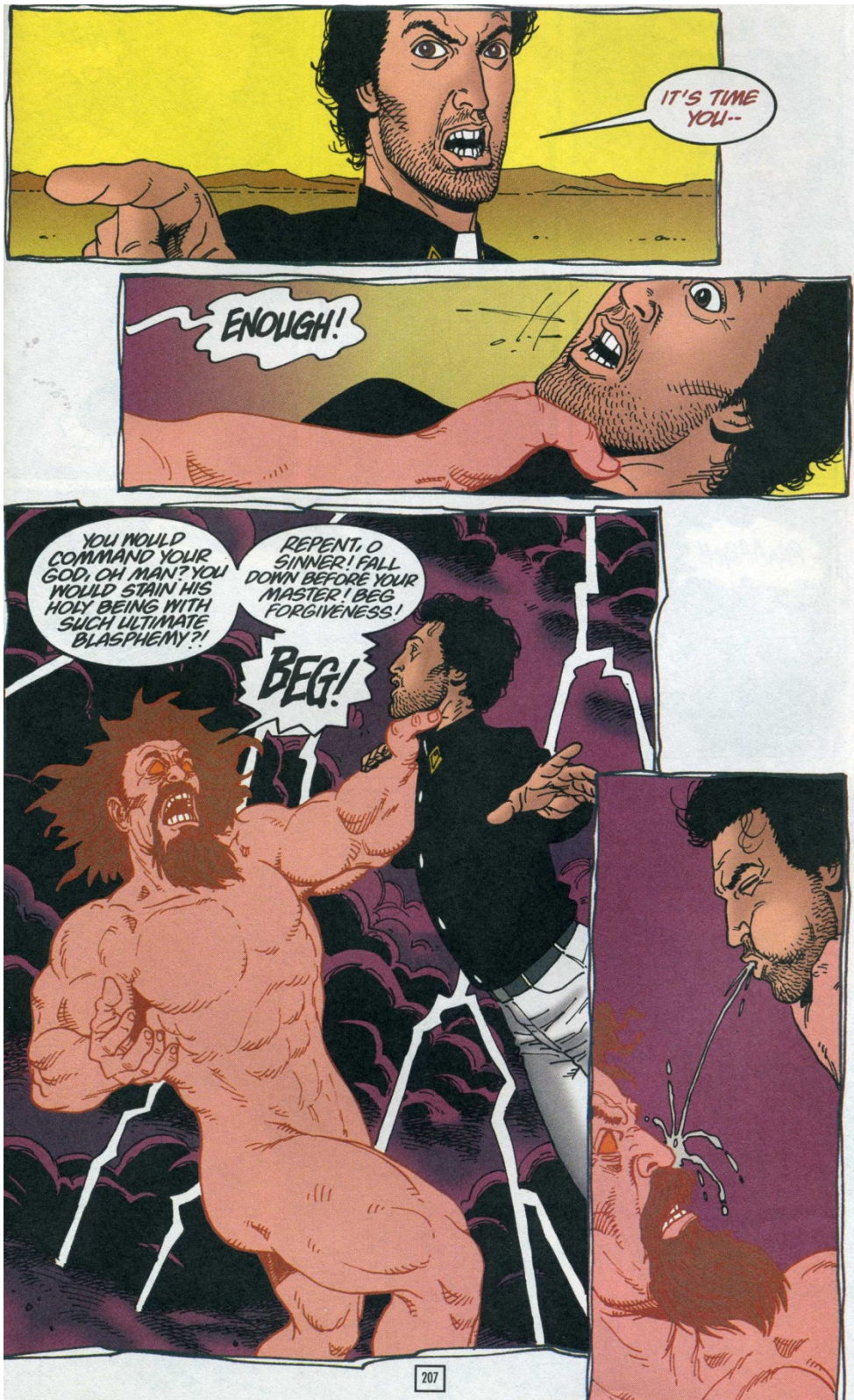
Figure 4.5 – The Loving God

Figure 4.6 – The Wrathful God

Figure 4.7 – God's Judgment

Figure 4.8 – The last shot of Jesse and Tulip.

Chapter 5: The Legitimization of the Geek Masculine: Constructing a Positive, Alternative Masculine Performance in Brian K. Vaughn and Pia Guerra's *Y: the Last Man*.

Whereas *Fables* continues the overtly conservative and heteronormative masculine identity that has become almost synonymous with American comics' superhero roots, Brian K. Vaughn and Pia Guerra's *Y: the Last Man* creates a future (perhaps) absent of hyperaggressive, domineering men. Begun in 2002, the same year as *Fables*, *Y: the Last Man* is about the fate of the world after a global apocalypse eradicates every creature with a Y chromosome, except for the protagonist, Yorick Brown, a comically ineffectual and out-of-work escape artist with a Bachelors degree in English and his pet capuchin monkey, Ampersand. The story centers on Yorick's juvenile quest to reunite with his girlfriend Beth (across the world from him when the apocalypse strikes) and the women who are attempting to ensure the future of the human species, out of personal, political, and humanitarian motivations. Primary among these women are 355, an agent of the Culper Ring, an American-espionage organization that has assigned her to protect Yorick, and Dr. Allison Mann, a geneticist and cloning researcher who is attempting to uncover the reasons for Yorick's immunity to the plague. The sixty issues of *Y: the Last Man,* published by Vertigo Press between September 2002 and March 2008, cover the first six years after the loss of almost all of the world's men, as the central characters travel from the American East coast westward across the United States, through Australia, Japan, China, and Russia, to end in France, exposing the changes such an apocalypse would have (according to the authors) upon the world. During and because of his journey, Yorick undergoes the expected alteration from his earlier immature and insecure self, but his transformation is not into the strong masculine ideal as

found in earlier comic narratives.[1] Instead, his maturation is more complicated, marked not only

by responsibility, assertiveness and confidence, but also by traits often considered anti-masculine

or weak in the American popular consciousness.

Yorick is aligned with the rise of a current trend in masculine development – the creation

of a "geek" aesthetic that is no longer seen as inferior to more traditional forms of behaving

masculine.[2] The term geek has become difficult to define, as it has been retaken, so to speak, by

formerly marginalized groups and transformed into a more positive center of identification. [3] Jon

Katz, after setting down earlier definitions of geeks, such as carnival performers who bite the

heads off chickens or those seen as socially inferior, redefines the term as:

> A member of the new cultural elite, a pop-culture-loving, techno-centered Community of
>
> social Discontents. Most geeks rose above a suffocatingly unimaginative educational
>
> system, where they were surrounded by obnoxious social values and hostile peers, to
>
> build the freest and most inventive culture on the planet…the Internet…Tendency toward
>
> braininess and individuality, traits that often trigger resentment, isolation, or exclusion.
>
> Identifiable by a singular obsessiveness about the things they love, both work and play,
>
> and a well-honed sense of bitter, even savage, outsider humor. Universally suspicious of

---

[1] *Captain Marvel*, created by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker in 1939, is the first comic to deal with the magical transformation of a boy into a strong, masculine superhero, but the superhero origin story often explains that it is the events of the superhero's childhood that explain their adult behavior as opposed to events in their adult lives (i.e. Superman and Batman, to name the most popular).

[2] There is a similar alteration in both American femininity, and both genders around the world, and all are most certainly worthy of academic attention; however, the purpose of this study is to examine changes in how American men behave as men.

[3] The differences between geek and nerd are unclear, and still heavily disputed by those claiming the title. A geek is traditionally someone who is obsessed with one facet of entertainment (a *Star Wars* geek or a fantasy-fiction geek), while a nerd usually refers to someone involved in scientific or technical pursuits. For the purposes of this paper, I will collapse these terms and their synonyms (dweeb, spaz, dork) into the phrase "geek," as each group (if, indeed, there is a difference between them) has encountered similar difficulties in achieving legitimacy and acceptance.

authority. In this era, the Geek Ascension, a positive, even envied term. Definitions

involving chicken heads no longer apply.[4]

Historically in American mainstream media, geeks have served as either comic relief or

sympathetically weak men who need to demonstrate "true" masculinity to win popularity and

self respect, as witnessed in the classic tale of the man who has sand kicked in his face and his

girl stolen away from him. During the 1980s, as a more specific example, movies like *Revenge*

of the Nerds or *Weird Science* have geeks desperately craving to be like more popular men, and

while they use their native intelligence and technical skills to become (questionably) heroes, the

characters must demonstrate sexual or physical prowess, in addition to their superior mental

skills, to achieve success. By the turn of the millennium, however, computerized technology had

become an integral part of youth culture, providing the disenfranchised a "room of one's own."

This growing collective has quite a bit of purchasing power, as seen in a growing popularity in

computers, technical gadgets (iPhones and eReaders), a return to science fiction on television in

the last five years (*Lost, Fringe*), and fantasy literature turning into film during the same years

(*The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter,* and the current vampire literature trend). All of these

cultural artifacts have previously been considered marginalized, "geeky," and fan groups

dedicated to these subcultures have now begun to find legitimacy, whereas previously they had

struggled with social acceptance.

Recently, multiple multi-million dollar films have been released based upon this geek

aesthetic – 2010's *Kick-Ass* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, for example, and while neither has

enjoyed overwhelming success in the theater, *Kick-Ass* has already been slated for a sequel after

it outsold every other DVD for 3 weeks after its release (and *Scott Pilgrim* is already expected to

---

[4] Katz, *Geeks*, xi.

do the same).[5] As comic books, video games, and "escapist" literature becomes co-opted by American masses, the public perception of geek men has shifted. What was once a sign of sexual inadequacy, social awkwardness, poor physical prowess, and "strange" interests has slowly begun developing its own recognizable social status – elevating the geek from the eternal awkward boy into the acceptable adult male. Geek culture has never before been so connected, having branched out from "underground" communities, like the comic shop or isolated online newsgroups in the 1980s and 1990s, to encompass its own highly publicized conventions and widely available online sites – all of which serve as focal sites for the development of self-identity.[6] In *Y: the Last Man*, we see a reflection of the self-invention of the American male geek, and Yorick's fight to garner respect is a direct analogy for a growing acceptance of this alternate form of masculine production. Yorick begins the comic very much an inexperienced, immature boy figure, especially in comparison to the women in his life, all of them career-oriented, assertive, and capable individuals. Much like the image of the geek masculine, Yorick matures from a socially inept and sexually inexperienced, if intelligent and kind-hearted, bungler, into a capable adult, but he does not embody the hypermasculine ideal as found in *Fables*' Bigby Wolf. Instead, Yorick combines his newfound confidence and his natural intelligence with wit, humor, physical awkwardness, an awareness of personal limitations, and sexual submissiveness in his masculine production, maintaining only the heroism and strength of character of the "traditional" American man.

---

[5] Michael Cera, the star of *Scott Pilgrim* has made a career in playing the socially awkward, but still popular, geek in blockbusters like *Juno* and *Zombieland.*

[6] For more information on the development of comic shops and conventions and their creation of group identity, see Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 1999.

A criticism of the comic is that in this quest to make him more of a man, the comic still silences the voice of women, as even in a world nearly unpopulated with men, a man still serves as the protagonist. In examining the global dynamics in relation to the local ones in *Y: the Last Man*, queer theorist Lyndsay Brown believes that the comic is a:

> decidedly heteronormative story: a linear, globally focused buddy-cop tale of intrigue and espionage on the high seas, full of one-liners, clichés, gender-based jokes, and an eventual victory by the good 'guys.'"[7]

Rather than looking at the comic as "decidedly heteronormative," however, we might do better to assign it the label of self-aware, as it frequently references, and mocks its own place in literary history and its own uses of sexuality.

This self-awareness is most prevalent in the story arcs concerning a group of traveling artists, Fish & Bicycle Productions, who struggle to retain and advance culture in a world torn apart by global tragedy.[8] They are the only characters outside the main cast with numerous individual issues dedicated to their story, which takes them from first producing original and classic theatrical productions in a traveling show (where actresses are cast in both male and female roles), to attempting a failed movie production, and finally to creating an internationally best-selling comic.[9] Their writer/leader, the passionate Cayce, serves as an author-surrogate who highlights *Y: the Last Man's* tongue-in-cheek literary awareness. After a run in with Ampersand, Cayce creates a play about Lionel, the last man on earth after a global apocalypse; Lionel's actress, however, is less than pleased with the character's name. She states that she wants

---

[7] Brown, "Yorick, Don't be a Hero," 3.

[8] Their name is notably a reference to the old adage "a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," and it serves as yet more evidence of the comic's self-awareness.

[9] As a cap, perhaps, to Fish & Bicycle's self-awareness is their comic, about the only woman to survive in a world full of men after a global apocalypse. When Yorick reads it for the first time, as the only established literary expert amongst the main cast of *Y: the Last Man*, he asked about its quality and he describes it as "meh."

something "more…dramatic...something Shakespearian? Like Hamlet or…or *Romeo*," to which

Cayce states that she hates "crappy works of fiction that try to sound important by stealing names

from the *Bard*" – much like *Y: the Last Man* has done with its hero, the clown Yorick. Yet

Cayce does more than supply literary humor; she also informs the reader of the influences and

inspirations of the comic:

> "Besides, Lionel is my tribute to the founding mother of sci-fi…a little tip of the hat to
>
> *Mary Shelley...*Back in the 1800's, she wrote this book called *The Last Man*, about a
>
> twenty-first century plague that kills everyone except for a guy named Lionel… [What
>
> caused] the plague? She never really gets around to explaining it. But it's not the point
>
> of her story. It's a condemnation of the…the unchecked *masculinity* that was always
>
> threatening to destroy the planet. It's about the failure of art and imagination to save the
>
> world."[10]

Vaughn and Guerra reference Shelly to establish their historical and literary credentials, as well

as to refocus Shelly's bleak future landscape with one filled with hope. The world of *Y: the Last

Man* is not on the brink of devastation when the men die; it is just an average day in the modern

world. The purpose of this work is not to establish men as a gender dedicated to destruction, but

to showcase alternative forms of masculine identity that are currently viable. This is a retelling

of Shelley's tale, but it is one that knows its place.[11]

Perhaps most importantly, the comic is aware of the complicated gender politics that are

involved in centering the story on the only man in a world full of women. This awareness is

most obvious in an outburst by Captain Kilina, a Hawaian drug-running pirate, whose ship

---

[10] Vaughn and Guerra, *One Small Step*, 149-150.

[11] *The Last Man*, published in 1826, is also known for both its celebration of her intimate circle of literary friends, and a rejection of their Romantic philosophy (i.e., human nature is ultimately corrupt and destructive).

Yorick, 355, and Dr. Mann stow away upon to gain access to Australia. When the Australian

Navy sinks Kilina's ship to stop more opium from entering their country, Yorick runs to her side

to prevent her from going down with her ship:

> KILINA Come on, you heartless *bastards*. Finish it already…
>
> YORICK What are you, fucking *Ahab* now? Going down with the ship is a bit played
>
> > out, don't you think? … We can still use one of the emergency rafts, Kilina. It's
> >
> > not too late.
>
> KILINA Yorick, it was too late for me the second I found out about *you*. My whole life,
>
> > I've always been a…a *supporting character* in somebody else's story. Daughter,
> >
> > student, fuck buddy, first mate, *whatever*. But when the plague went down, I
> >
> > finally saw a chance to *change* that…wanted to be a *leader*. I wanted to help as
> >
> > many women as I could. I wanted to give them an *adventure*. And if a few
> >
> > people ended up getting hurt in the process, what the hell? We were all going to
> >
> > be gone in a few years, anyway, right? And then the last *man* on earth shows up.
>
> YORICK Kilina, save the bullshit thesis paper for your lit class and *let's go*.
>
> KILINA You don't' get it, do you? The Australians are *right*. Now that you're here,
>
> > I'm just another crazy bitch fucking up the world *you're* going to save. It figures.
> >
> > An entire planet of women, and the one *guy* gets to be the lead.[12]

Kilina's diatribe demonstrates that the authors are aware of these types of concerns – and, I

would argue, have dismissed them. *Y: the Last Man* is ultimately less concerned with the nature

of femininity than with the nature of masculinity.

---

[12] Vaughn and Guerra, *Girl on Girl*, 91-93.

This concern is established in the opening of the comic, during which all of the major characters are introduced only moments before the global apocalypse strikes. An unemployed English BA graduate, Yorick is only confident when performing escape artist tricks or making obscure literary and popular culture references. His aimlessness is only highlighted by comparisons to his more successful parents, a father who is an English professor, and a mother who became a U.S. Representative for the state of Ohio. Hero, Yorick's sister, is a lead paramedic, whose team is respected by the male emergency work crews, and although her profession is not as prestigious as her parents', Hero also demonstrates competency in her personal life, especially her sexual conquests -- her female colleagues refer to her as the "whorebag [who has] effed *every* firefighter from last year's calender."[13] All of Yorick's initial relationships, on the other hand, including with his girlfriend Beth Deville, who, we are told through flashbacks, Yorick feels that he does not deserve, demonstrate Yorick's incompetency in traditional masculine roles. The first concern of both Jennifer Brown, Yorick's mother, and Beth Deville during the opening is Yorick's interview for a job which he failed to get. As the first issue draws to a close, and the global apocalypse is about to hit, it becomes increasingly obvious that Beth Deville, surrounded by the beauty of the Australian desert as she pursues her archaeological career, is preparing to break up with Yorick over the phone – while he is fumbling through an attempted marriage proposal.

The phone conversation between Yorick and Beth is repeatedly broken up every few pages with introductions of new characters, all of which underscore Yorick's inadequacies. After seeing how Jennifer Brown handles herself in a "casual" conversation with a Senator who threatens her reelection, we meet "Alter" Tse'elon, a colonel in the Israeli Army who deplores

---

[13] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 28.

her fellow female soldiers who "could be paratroopers or naval commanders…but men have taught them to be content behind a typewriter or radar screen."[14] The next page has Yorick stating his fears that he has become agoraphobic, too uncomfortable to step outside to see the world, while "you and the rest of my globetrotting friends are all off saving the world or whatever, but I haven't done a goddamn thing for *anyone*."[15] The next character introduced is the American secret agent 355, who has been sent to Jordan to protect a woman's rights activist fighting to end the "honor killings" of women by Muslim extremists. Even though the rescue attempt fails, 355 demonstrates high levels of athleticism, combat prowess, and compassion by free-scaling a building, defeating two armed intruders, and attempting to spare women from needless deaths. Dr. Allison Mann is introduced giving birth to her own clone, and even though she physically appears no older than Yorick and Beth, she has her own research assistant, which hints at the strong level of intelligence and dedication it takes to achieve her position at an early age. These brief vignettes, only a few pages each, introduce characters who overshadow Yorick's every accomplishment until he appears in the final panel of the first issue looking uncertainly out the window for the source of the loud gun shot that came after a woman's declaration that "all of the men are dead."[16] The underlining impression of both the issue itself and the final panel is that if Yorick, even though he is likeable, in a hapless, bumbling way, is our last man on earth, there is little hope for the future of the species.

The next 59 issues, however, work to dispute that claim, as Yorick matures into a capable masculine figure through his encounters with strong feminine figures, unconstrained by traditional, patriarchal masculine identities. It is necessary, then, to examine the women who

---

[14] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 16.

[15] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 17.

[16] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 34-35.

guide, instruct, and, at times, prevent Yorick's masculine development, before tackling Yorick's altered identity and fight for legitimacy. Jennifer Brown is a Democrat Representative from Ohio, whose politics mostly follow the party line, but she does take a stand against funding international abortion, and even risks alienating herself from a Democrat Senator who threatens her reelection campaign over the issue. After the apocalypse, she stands unarmed against an armed collection of wives of dead Republican Congressmen who are demanding their husband's seats, but Jennifer fearlessly argues that it is unlawful for them to take their husband's positions without due process. If Jennifer were only fearless, assertive and powerful, we might argue that she is no more than a female vessel for traditional masculine ideals, but instead she is also motherly, crying when she is reunited with her children, and showing affection that might normally be frowned upon in a man. Ultimately she reconciles these parts of herself by showing herself a strong enough mother to let her children Hero and Yorick travel out into a dangerous world to help save mankind instead of becoming over-protective and smothering.

It is true that Jennifer is also a product of her gendered environment, however. In her early conversation with the male Senator, she assumes that if the Senator is privately talking to the male President, it has to be about baseball, rather than about national security issues. However, this could be seen as a moment of anger, a result of the Senator's refusal to acknowledge her by the gender-neutral title representative, pointedly calling her congresswoman with obvious derision. In that same spirit, she also unbalances the Senator who has come to threaten her with a casual sexual comment, "Am I about to get spanked, Marty…Because I usually leave that to my husband."[17] Yorick's mother is ultimately a representation of the world before the apocalypse, the world of second wave feminism, and the powerful women who fought

---

[17] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 10.

108

to earn respect – even as they unconsciously held onto some of the traditional female gendered traits found in essentialist definitions.

A representative of a more complicated portrayal of gender dynamics as found in post feminism is Agent 355, who also matures into a more balanced person over the course of the comic. Her real name unknown, she goes by her Culper Ring pseudonym, and her strongest characteristics are her dedication to her organization and the confidence she has in her own abilities. Orphaned at a young age, Agent 355 is recruited by the Culper Ring during her teenage years, after she learns how to fight brutally against those who insult her race, though, even at as child, we see Agent 355 question traditional gender roles when she wonders why women don't use swords (her father answers this query with "because their Daddies do all the fighting *for* them").[18] Her mentor, the previous Agent 355, teaches her how to fight, and presumably instills in her the purpose of the Culper Ring – to serve as a personal secret organization to the President of the United States.[19] Physically powerful and resilient, she is first drawn with a short cropped afro, a hard jaw line, and shapeless clothes; her only hint of femininity is the redness of her lips.[20] Agent 355 is assertive and dominant, frequently criticizing Yorick for his lack of physical prowess and immaturity, and she is often teased by Yorick for her complete lack of popular culture knowledge – a trait that highlights her dedication to her job. On more than one occasion she is referred to as a man. Another character, Alter, openly states that she is almost a man, and Yorick often refers to her by masculine nicknames – bro, dude, dick, or man.

---

[18] Vaughn and Guerra, *Paper Dolls*, 102.

[19] The historical Culper Ring served George Washington during his presidency, but was dissolved at the end of the American Revolutionary War.

[20] See Figure 3.1

Like Yorick's mother, however, she is more complex than simply a woman with traditional masculine traits. While she is portrayed as an action hero, she is also compassionate, humorous, and caring. Repeatedly, she attempts to end needless bloodshed, only killing when it is unavoidable, and over the six years she spends traveling with Yorick and Dr. Mann, she becomes increasingly more conflicted by the ease at which she kills others. While she and Yorick are captives of a girl gang in Japan, she laments:

> I'm sick. I'm so *fucking sick* of this. Of being fucking *hard*. *Bullshit*. I—I liked it better when I was slow on the trigger, when doing all this wasn't so fucking *easy*. But there's no room for it, is there? No room for *mercy* in a world where the only people left are…are women with nothing to *lose*…you don't know what it's like to..to look a *child* in the eye, and know that you have it inside you to fucking *stop* her. Stop her from *being*.[21]

This guilt does not reduce Agent 355's capabilities, but humanizes her, and much like when Yorick demonstrates a new form of masculine identity, she demonstrates a new form of femininity – one capable of strength, courage, dominance, and assertiveness. She is frequently mocked for her rare displays of traditional gender roles (she knits when she has a spare moment, and is asked repeatedly by both Yorick and Dr. Mann if she is making a rifle cozy), but by the end of the comic she incorporates more aspects of traditional femininity – she knits the scarf for Yorick, and she is last seen wearing a "little black dress," with her hair grown out of masculine dreads into a long wave. These physical alterations do not remove her strength or dominance, however, and she, like Yorick, endures verbal abuse (though more lighthearted than Yorick's) for her performance of femininity, but it is no less viable, and I would argue, more positive than

---

[21] Vaughn and Guerra, *Kimono Dragons*, 71-72.

the traditional heroines of comics, whose short skirts and oversized breasts are shown more often than their struggles with humanity.

Whereas Agent 355 has the physicality absent in Yorick, Dr. Allison Mann surpasses both of the other main characters with her successes. Dr. Mann distinguishes herself by achieving a PhD in biotechnology, winning the National Medal for Science, and becoming tenured at Harvard, all by the age of 31. These monumental achievements, however, are gained at the cost of her social development – Dr. Mann is short, stuffy, and closed off, though she is fully aware of both her shortcomings and the reasons she possesses them. Born with the name Mastumori Ayuko to two brilliant doctors, a Chinese surgeon mother, and a Japanese geneticist father, Dr. Mann changed her name to "something kitsch-y and faux-Asian to insult my father."[22] It is this disregard and hatred for her father that provides her drive and willpower, as witnessed in issue #48, "The Tin Man," and that establishes the history of her relationships. Her mother passively accepts her father's affair with his research assistant, although the family moves to the United States in an attempt to maintain her parent's marriage. While in college, she is described as a "shy little dyke pretending to be a chain-smoking tough guy" by her lover, and although when she informs her father that she is gay, she claims she's known since she was four, there is more than a little "tough guy" anger in her declaration that she "fuck[s] *girls*, Dad. Just like you."[23] The relationship with her lover, Mercedes, ends right before they graduate college, when Mercedes claims that it is time to put aside childish rebellion against their fathers and grow up, but Dr. Mann's anguish and rage defend that while she might delight in her father's disappointment of her lifestyle, she is not a homosexual only to hurt him.

---

[22] Vaughn and Guerra, *Cycles*, 12.

[23] Vaughn and Guerra, *Kimono Dragons*, 109 and 111.

Her disgust at her partner leads her to close off her emotional life, as seen when, during her attempts to clone herself, she claims that she was able to remove the most painful aspect of childbirth – "love."[24] Even her desire to explore cloning only came when she was informed that her father was years away from cloning himself – in order to "best" him, she violated several notable laws and regulations concerning human experimentation to achieve her goal (ironically, she lost to her father by mere minutes). She repeatedly bears the brunt of Yorick's humor, though she teases him mercilessly for his incompetence and childishness. Emotionally reserved, she is ironically the only main character to successfully find a life-long romantic partnership. Like Agent 355, Dr. Mann serves to distance Yorick from traditional views of masculinity. Whereas Agent 355 is the physically superior soldier-hero, both loyal and deadly, Dr. Mann embodies the stereotype of the distant, overly logical doctor/scientist, who flaunts the rules to achieve her own personal goals and disregards emotional entanglements. That these twin aspects of masculinity (physical strength and logic) are embodied by women strengthens the claim of Judith Butler that gender must be nothing more than a performance if essential definitions of gender can be violated so forcefully. Like Agent 355, however, Dr. Mann is more than the unfeeling scientist – when she believes that she is the cause of the global apocalypse, she throws herself into breast cancer research to attempt to atone for her sins, while her father (who believes that he is responsible) continues his own research regardless of the (possible) cost to humanity. She confronts her father, stating that "You were reckless and…and *sloppy* and you let your ego get in the way of your science, [and I am different} because I *learn* from my mistakes. I care about people other than myself, and I owe it to them to get this right. I *will* get it right."[25] During the denouement in the last book, *Whys and Wherefores*, Dr. Mann makes good on her

---

[24] Vaughn and Guerra, *Kimono Dragons*, 118.

[25] Vaughn and Guerra, *Motherland*, 85.

promise, creating an inoculation for newly cloned male children to survive whatever virus decimated the planet. She also is able to forgive Rose, an Australian spy who seduced Dr. Mann in order to spy upon them, and the two live together until she dies of cancer shortly after achieving her cure.

Yorick, unlike his closest traveling companions, does not begin the comic with any sense of assertiveness or capability, and it is these traits that he works most towards. As the comic opens, he is described as a clownish lay-about with slight agoraphobia and chronic unemployment whose only talents are an encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture, a strong sense of humor, and the escape artist skills he has honed since he was a child. Unable to turn his BA in English into any form of employment, Yorick desperately wants to prove to Beth that he has the sense of responsibility she craves from him. To demonstrate this, he volunteers to raise a monkey to assist the handicap, even though he has no experience with animals, whether assistance or non, and this inane gesture only drives Beth to finally break things off between them. Right before she ends things, he hurriedly proposes, and it is at that moment that the catastrophe strikes, cutting the phone conversation short. That he spends the next six years trying to find a woman who does not want him, and attempting to remain faithful to her, only heightens the pathetic overtones of the character.

While humorously incapable at the beginning of the story, Yorick is far from unsympathetic; he quickly establishes himself as clever, witty, and connected to popular culture – traits which endear him to the traditional comic audience. He establishes his obsessive love of literature early with references to the Shakespearian roots of his and his sister's names, but he also shows his knowledge of multiple aspects of pop culture. While reminiscing at the Washington Monument, with all of its phallic symbolism, he meets a musician who is mourning

the loss of fellow artists. She laments the death of mainstream bands like the Beatles, the Who, U2, and Bob Dylan, while Yorick's tastes lean more towards the alternative – Radiohead, Tom Waits, The Eels, The Motherfucking D, and David Bowie (the transgendered nature of the last cannot go unmentioned). He quotes both science fiction (Star Trek, Star Wars, *Sirens of Titan*), comics (Superman's fortress of Solitude) and classic comedy (the Three Stooges, the Little Rascals), as well as dozens of other genres of popular culture (James Bond, Judy Blume, Kermit the Frog, gangster movies, and pirates). He has a fascination with science, reveres astronauts as (once) living legends, and can quote classic and new films. While he lacks Dr. Mann's scientific capabilities, Yorick is quick-witted, often saving himself with his ability to outthink those around him. The trait that aligns him most strongly with geek culture, however, is his disarming wit – humor comes easily to him, whether self-deprecating, cutting, or teasing. He frequently serves as the comic's punchline, not from pratfalls or other types of physical humor, but from his quick comebacks and linguistics puns. Upon entering Tokyo four years after the apocalypse, he states:

> YORICK: A million bikes and not a single lock. This is the bizarre version of pretty
> much every other unmanned city we've blown into.
> AGENT 355: Tokyo was like this *before* the plague, actually.
> YORICK: A super happy crime-free Utopia for girls?

Whether quoting from *Bladerunner* at just the right moment or making his enemies underestimate him to Yorick's advantage, he uses his wit ceaselessly throughout the text.

What is most striking about Vaughn and Guerra's protagonist is that they created someone who would be useless in a post-apocalyptic world. While his ability to escape bonds could (and does) help, Yorick's survival skills are limited – he has no experience with firearms, scavenging, self defense, hunting, or construction – all of his attention has been focused on the

impractical. His physical limitations are continually brought to the reader's attention, both by

Yorick himself and the world of women that surrounds him. Though he still could be considered

tall, Yorick is depicted with none of the massive male physiques normally associated with

mainstream comics.[26] He is often shown with spindly arms, and even the occasional slight

paunch, when circumstances after the apocalypse allow for a surplus of food. The artist does not

shy from showing Yorick's nude form, and even though the character seems comfortable with

women while he is naked, his self-deprecating remarks demonstrate his awareness of his

"shortcomings."[27] When reminded of Dr. Mann's academic achievements, Yorick states that he

may not stand as her intellectual equal, "but I almost qualified for the president's physical fitness

award in the sixth grade. Almost" – a response that casts aspersions on both his intellectual and

physical achievements.[28] Perhaps the scene which most strongly outlines Yorick's lack of

competency in his new environment is his speech wherein he compares himself to two astronauts

who had escaped the apocalypse because they were in space at the time:

> Those guys were fucking heroes even *before* the plague hit. They're much better
>
> qualified to save mankind than some socially retarded white kid. Don't get me wrong, I
>
> still want to do whatever I can to help, but my motto's always been, 'with little power
>
> comes little responsibility.' And that's not about being a slacker mind you. It's about
>
> knowing your *limitations.* I mean, I can barely do a chin-up. The only shit I've ever
>
> been good at involves Chinese finger cuffs and…and milk can escapes. Most of the time,

---

[26] See Figure 3.2.

[27] See Figure 3.3 and 3.4.

[28] Vaughn and Guerra, 10.

I just fuck stuff up. Everyone thinks they know how to 'fix' the world, but we'd all be a

lot better off if some of us just stayed out of the way…you know?[29]

He refuses to accept, for a majority of the comic, that he has anything worthwhile to give to the

world –even when complemented, he mentions his failings, arguing that "ladies go nuts for zits

and a thinning hairline. I combine the worst attributes of the adolescent boys who teased them

and the middle-aged husbands who left them."[30]

He is far from the only character, though, to comment upon his lack of strength, as nearly

all of the women characters insult or humiliate him about this apparent weakness. After guessing

that Yorick in disguise might be a man, a former model-turned-human-remains-disposer grasps

his genitalia, citing that "I don't believe it. You're a *real man*…but just barely." [31]   He is

repeatedly referred to as "harmless," or weak, and his attempts to perform "traditional" manly

duties, like splitting firewood or fighting in hand-to-hand combat, are remarked as being "like a

girl." Throughout the series, Agent 355 teases him, and she even becomes outraged when he

interferes during a fight, even when his attempts at physical violence succeed – which is rare.

Even though his physique is not drawn in a feminine style, his appearance is often linked with a

woman's figure, as when a transgendered prostitute tells him that he must learn to bind down his

breasts more if he wishes to successfully pose as a man.

Yorick spends the first two years after the apocalypse avoiding sexual encounters, and it

is only after an intervention from another female agent of the Culper Ring, 711, that he comes to

grips with his own sexual hang-ups. After discovering that Yorick has been putting his life

---

[29] Vaughn and Guerra, *One Small Step*, 45.

[30] Vaughn and Guerra, *Ring of Truth*, 8.

[31] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 46.

purposefully in danger to fulfill an unacknowledged death wish, 711 puts him through "a form of

aversion therapy" which posits that sexuality and morality are rooted in the same principles, but

really serves as a vehicle to announce these issues to the audience. During the process, Yorick is

placed in a submissive role, mostly nude and tied, while 711 alternates between the fetish garb of

a dominatrix and the silken robe of a professional courtesan. The comic alternates between

depicting Yorick as a sexual aggressor and a passive sexual receiver. By far, however, he is

more often seen as passive, and even when he initiates a sexual encounter, he is then placed

under another's power -- while he is the one to initiate sex with Beth II, for example, she is the

one who pushes him back onto a grave and removes her clothes. Repeatedly, Yorick is shown in

submissive positions, especially in the cover art, where he is either tied up or beneath a woman.[32]

He even acknowledges this sexual submission; when he and Agent 355 admit their feelings for

one another, she states her fear that as soon as he crawls off of her, he'll run back to Beth, and he

quips "First of all, I wouldn't be on top. I have very poor upper-body strength."[33] According to

711, it is not the act of submission that is weak, but failure to admit his enjoyment of the act, and

Yorick embraces his submissive sexual position throughout the rest of the comic. Yorick is not

afraid to be seen, in a sexual sense, as the passive partner, and he is stronger when he admits his

desires than when he bottles up his sexual frustrations, and those attracted to him respond to that

fascination. During a hallucinogenic vision, Beth sees Yorick in danger from a King Kong-

esque Ampersand, and she tears away her clothing, transforming into a sexually titillating

superheroine coming to his rescue, stating, "This is *your* dream. I'm…I'm living your dream."[34]

---

[32] See Figure 3.5 and 3.6.

[33] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 83.

[34] Vaughn and Guerra, *Girl on Girl*, 123.

Seeing herself as his savior, Beth decides to travel to Paris, where they had originally planned to meet up, even though all logic tells her that he is as dead as the other men – she sees herself as his savior, and it rekindles her love. This scene only emphasizes Yorick's preferred role as sexual submissive, but these scenes are erotic moments for both the characters and the audience – they are intended to titillate, not disgust. Yorick becomes a more confidant person when he accepts this side of his nature, and it is not cast in a negative light.

There are times throughout the comic, however, when Yorick aligns himself with aspects of the patriarchal system that Beth desired before the apocalypse. For example, when informed of his father's death, he accepts the loss without tears, attempting to maintain the stoic façade required by hypermasculinity. He repeatedly throws himself into danger, not only to end his existence, as already stated, but to protect women – even when his genetic material may be the most essential thing for the continuance of the species. Even though he has no place in the government, he interrupts the heads of state to give them a speech on the founding *fathers*, stating that he'd "hate to have to tell *my* children that this great nation, which millions of my brothers shed their blood to forge, was completely *undone* by [you women]."[35] His choice of words intentionally belittles the women occupying the most powerful positions in the United States, all of whom he dismisses almost out of hand. His humor occasionally strays into gender-bashing, mocking Dr. Mann and Rose after catching them having sex by mimicking their sexual escapades towards Agent 355, and complaining that "laughter died with the dudes" when she does not appreciate his gay bashing.[36]

---

[35] Vaughn and Guerra, *Unmanned*, 77.

[36] Vaughn and Guerra, *Kimono Dragons*, 119.

These moments slowly begin to vanish as Yorick matures, though, and by the end of the comic he stands staunchly against such small minded attitudes regarding gender. Most attitudes of gender superiority are called into question, as they are immediately challenged or entirely removed from the comic by the last graphic novel. When he chides the American president for destroying the country, she calls him a "self righteous child" for his simplistic view of the complications of office, and he is similarly ignored when he acts in accordance with a patriarchal system. As the comic progresses, fewer of these insulting forms of humor occur, until finally Yorick himself is chiding his own grown up clone for attempting to continue them. Yet, despite being chided by 355 for his juvenile homosexual jokes, the comic's fear of having men labeled homosexual may be *Y: The Last Man*'s only failure to support a complicated gender dynamic. When a child conceived on an American-Russian joint space venture is forced to hide his gender by dressing in a baby girl's dress, his Russian guard states her concern that this act will turn him into a "homosexualist."[37] And even Yorick's confession that he is a "long time friend of the Friends of Dorothy," casts homosexuals in the stereotypical light of show-tune loving Broadway fans.[38] During his intervention by Agent 711, Yorick is continually referred to as faggot, a label he refuses to use himself, stating that he isn't gay, "not that there is anything wrong with [it]."[39] This uncovers the only incidence of male homosexuality in the comic, as Yorick confesses to being molested as a little boy by another boy while tied up, and while Yorick argues that it was a "sick kid" and not a "sick homosexual," it still remains the only portrayal of men sleeping with

---

[37] Vaughn and Guerra, *Motherland,* 18.

[38] In an earlier scene, Yorick dreams of Oz, casting the his companions in the main roles. Figure 3.7 is the cover art for that issue, which casts Yorick as a transgendered Dorothy.

[39] Vaughn and Guerra, *Safeword*, 34.

other men.   Even though the comic embraces female homosexuality, as seen in the characters of Hero, Beth, Dr. Mann, and Rose, there is still the prevalent fear of male homosexuality.[40]

Y: the Last Man attempts a hard balancing act, but the authors are aware that even though the comic medium's biggest consumer base are men, they are aware that the men reading the comic may appreciate their fluid definitions of physically strong women or morally strong men. Yorick is a champion of rejecting gender boundaries, especially in his confrontation with the most likely cause of the global apocalypse, Dr. Mann's father, Dr. Matsumori. Matsumori believes that the genocide began during the birth of a clone of his daughter, and it is certain that the drugs he injected himself and Ampersand with saved both Matsumori and Yorick. Deciding that the world would be better off without men, he plans to murder Yorick and commit suicide, saying:

> MATSUMORI: Ever since I was a little boy, women have terrified me. I suspect this is why my male colleagues and I *marginalized* so many later in life. Our sexes may be equal, but they are not the same. I'd hoped we could all find a way to coexist, but evolution clearly prefers the idea of *segregation*…
>
> YORICK: A few years ago, I would have been totally down with your suicide pack, ace. I made up all sorts of excuses about how *offing myself* and leaving this world to the ladies would be noble and selfless and… shut up and listen to me, Matsurmori! Every guy goes through a period where he's…he's scared shitless and completely baffled by girls, right? But then we're supposed to *grow up*, figure out that the best place for all the great women

---

[40] For more on the historization of this fear in literature, see Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet," in comics see Brooker *Batman Unmasked*, and in social bonds see Connell, *Masculinities*.

probably isn't *behind* every great man. The two sides are only going to get through this together….so why don't you stop being such a *pussy* and man the *fuck* up?[41]

In this scene, Yorick challenges not only Matsumori, but all the men of his generation, all of his "male colleagues," who continue to enforce a patriarchal system – and seek to find legitimization for it. While Yorick's language choice could be seen as problematic, as it casts the debate in stereotypically sexist language, aligning female genitalia with weakness, seeing it as such would be short sighted. Yorick's challenge to Matsumori inverts the usual meanings ironically – in this instance, to be a "pussy" is to *fail* to treat women equally, while "acting like a man" means to distance yourself from the patriarchy.

Yorick himself ultimately stands as the moral mouthpiece of the comic, questioning the decisions of others and passing judgment on their actions. The morality he espouses reveres life, equality, peace, and taking responsibility for one's own actions. This stance only further removes him from the hypermasculine ideal, which has no problem sowing death and destruction when on "moral" ground (i.e., when not starting the fight). When his sister Hero joins the masculine hate group the Sisters of the Amazons and unquestioningly kills when commanded, he argues that she is responsible for her own actions, regardless of the cult-esque brainwashing she has experienced: "I'm as liberal as the next Naderite…but *fuck* that Patty Hearst shit. My sister is responsible for what she did. She deserves to be punished."[42] He does not believe, however, that she deserves death, since he sees killing as immoral. When he does accidentally kill a woman in self-defense, shooting her in the leg specifically so she will not die, he suffers recurrent guilt for his actions. On multiple occasions, he surrenders when his friends are threatened, even though his genetic material is more important for the survival of the species,

---

[41] Vaughn and Guerra, *Motherland*, 79.

[42] Vaughn and Guerra, *Cycles*, 112.

because he does not want to be responsible for their deaths. His moral stance also includes forgiveness for those who repent their actions, as he helps Hero heal from her guilt over killing an unarmed woman and accepts Rose even though she has betrayed his trust. He stands as a liberal humanitarian, in opposition to the jingoistic, hyperaggressive male superhero, and Yorick finishes the comic, after the near genocide of the human species, with these ideals intact. When truly pressured, and the Israeli commando Alter stands revealed as the woman who killed both the love of his life and his mother, Yorick cannot find it within himself to kill her. She begs for release, seeking to die the only honorable death that she can imagine (death at the hands of a man in combat) and Yorick refuses to accept the label she has attempted to place upon him – he refuses to become a murderer, and thus rejects all of the anti-masculine rhetoric of groups like the Sisters of the Amazon, who see all men as base animals without principles.

As stated earlier, the entirety of Yorick's journey is the struggle to be accepted as a man, even though he does not embody many of the stereotypical masculine traits. His childishness in the first few graphic novels nearly threatens the extinction of mankind, but as he begins to accept both his survivor's guilt and his lack of traditional masculinity, he becomes more self confident and accepting of his differences. Shortly after his intervention by Agent 711, when he discovers that he survived the plague because of antibodies present in Ampersand, Yorick bemoans that:

> any delusions I once had about me being the protagonist of some predestined epic quest have gone the way of *boy bands*. Can you believe I honestly used to think there was a *reason* I was still here? Divine intervention, fate, fucking *magic*…There had to be *some* larger-than-life explanation why it wasn't Stephen Hawking or…or Clint Eastwood or

Chuck Palahniuk or any of the millions of other dudes who were substantially better

suited to this job than I. But now I know it was all just a crap shoot.[43]

The self-recrimination and lack of self doubt ebbs as the comic progresses, and he accepts both

his limitations and his strengths. His courage had never been in doubt, except for the

questionable bravery in successfully committing suicide, but he learns to not risk his life

performing tasks better suited to more capable people. His self-deprecating humor moves from

the present tense to the past, as right before he meets Beth for the first time in six years, he tells

Agent 355 that "I used to be a self-centered, suicidal shut-in, but these days, I flatter myself to

think I'm a whole different string of alliteration."[44] While he still has doubts about his ability to

raise boys, "if I ever have a son," he asks, "how the fuck am *I* going to teach him to be, you

know…*masculine*," he stops looking down on himself for his inability to perform what he

considers masculinity.[45] When, during the comic's denouement, he speaks to one of his various

adult clones who is the same age he was when the comic began, he tells him that he is going on a

journey that begins in boyhood, and it is this allegorical journey that is the heart of this essay.

Once Yorick accepts that he is different from his earlier understanding of masculinity, he

struggles to find that same acceptance in a world of women who see him as a child. Rarely is he

referred to by any woman as a man until near the comic's end, and those few moments are

usually in recollection of all lost men – as when Natalya tells him that it is nice to hear a man's

voice again. Usually, he is cajoled for his boyish antics, and referred to either by a plethora of

---

[43] Vaughn and Guerra, *Ring of Truth*, 163. -- Even Yorick's choices of "better men," demonstrates his connection to fluid, masculine portrayals associated with geek culture – Stephen Hawking is brilliant, but almost entirely paralyzed, Clint Eastwood is famous for his *portrayals* of hard-bitten masculine characters, but is a renowned director of emotional dramatic films, and Chuck Palahniuk created *Fight Club* (1996)*, the novel and later movie about an underground collective of masculine violence mocked by its author.

[44] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 23.

[45] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 41.

boyish synonyms, like boy wonder, magic lad, innocent boy, harmless boy, or as someone who splits wood, fights, shoots, runs, etc. "like a girl." As he demonstrates forethought, responsibility, and strong humanitarian ideals, he slowly is acknowledged as both an adult and as a man. In their last sparring match, Agent 355 tells him that he's "finally stopped hitting like a girl" and refers to him as "big man."[46] While this might demonstrate only that Yorick has become physically competent, in his fight with Alter several pages later, he is quickly outmatched, and it is his quick wits, not his fighting skills, that save him. His full acceptance probably comes near the end of their journey, both when Ciba wants Yorick to be in her child's life, stating that children need "a strong male influence," and after reuniting with Beth.[47] She compliments him on his manly scars and the sexual prowess that he never demonstrated before, and after confessing that she was going to break up with him when they last spoke, she gives him legitimacy:

> You have always been an extraordinary human being, but I…I wasn't sure you were the right person for me to spend the rest of my life with. But now, now you're courageous and strong and…and responsible. You're the man I've been dreaming of, *literally*.[48]

These three attributes – courageous, strong, and responsible – are the attributes of traditionally performed masculinity that are still incorporated in Yorick's characteristics, and with these traits are Yorick's other geek aspects: humanitarianism, appreciation for popular culture, humor, the ability to admit weakness, and a willingness to accept a submissive sexual role, if desired, without it diminishing his self-esteem or moral strength.

---

[46] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 11 and 21.

[47] Vaughn and Guerra, *Motherland*, 77.

[48] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 67.

Perhaps it would be enough to end the analysis of Yorick's journey with this acceptance, but interestingly enough, there is another aspect of the comic that further demonstrates both its self awareness and willingness to alter gendered constructions. Just as Yorick was influenced by the women in his life to become a mature, "geek" adult, there is one character who was positively influenced by him – his sister. Hero's story follows a more traditional narrative arc, as she initially commits sinful acts, and spends the rest of the comic atoning. In a radical shift from her promiscuity, Hero resurfaces after the apocalypse in the Daughters of the Amazon, a man-hating cult of women who sees the apocalypse as Earth's final retaliation against vile-oppression, and who, like their namesake, remove one breast as a sign of their loyalty. Led by Victoria, a charismatic British chess master, forbidden by her gender to take the title of Grand Champion, the Daughters are little more than a gang. Using pseudo-religious feminist rhetoric, Victoria seeks to empower herself, while simultaneously carrying out her obsession to rid the world of any remembrance of men. Upon hearing about a last man, Victoria sets out to kill him, and uses Hero to torture and murder anyone in their path. Though she occasionally questions the righteousness of their path, Hero obeys Victoria's demands, killing whomever she demands and luring her brother out for Victoria to kill him. On his knees before Victoria, Yorick is saved by Sonia, a former convict attracted to Yorick, but Hero retaliates, killing Sonia before her brother's eyes, and, when disarmed, taunting him to kill her in return. Leaving her in the hands of a woman's community of former convicts, Yorick continues on his quest, and Hero struggles to atone for her actions. After escaping the compound, she reunites with her mother, who asks her to locate Yorick and protect him. She spends the rest of the comic trailing after him, fighting a hallucination of Victoria who urges her to kill him, and continues to help the people left in Yorick's wake – mimicking his quest to repopulate the earth and find Beth. In many ways, Hero

becomes a clone of Yorick, garbing herself in a cowboy hat and leather jacket, maturing into a hero as Yorick matures into an adult.[49] When Yorick is seduced by, and unknowingly impregnates, a former flight-attendant named Beth, it is Hero who assists her through the birth and watches over Yorick's daughter – Beth Junior. During the denouement, Yorick decides to stay with Beth II, and it is Hero who becomes involved with Beth Deville. Their last panel has the couple locked in a passionate embrace in the Australian outback, living out the life that could have been Yorick's before the apocalypse struck. While Yorick's story is just "another boring bildungsroman," Hero's is one of redemption, the anti-hero who earns the right to a happy ending.[50] In many ways, hers is one traditionally found in westerns and military melodramas, and, unlike the infamous *Shane*, Hero ends the comic in the arms of the woman she loves – Beth Deville. Her story is the most traditional, the most expected, and in many ways, is the mirror to Yorick's, as she even ends with Yorick's dream woman. By naming the sister Hero, the comic's authors seem to be challenging their own position that Yorick is, indeed, the hero of the piece, and that maybe there is no single hero, just as there is no single performance of gender identity.

---

[49] See Figure 3.8.

[50] Vaughn and Guerra, *Whys and Wherefores*, 134.
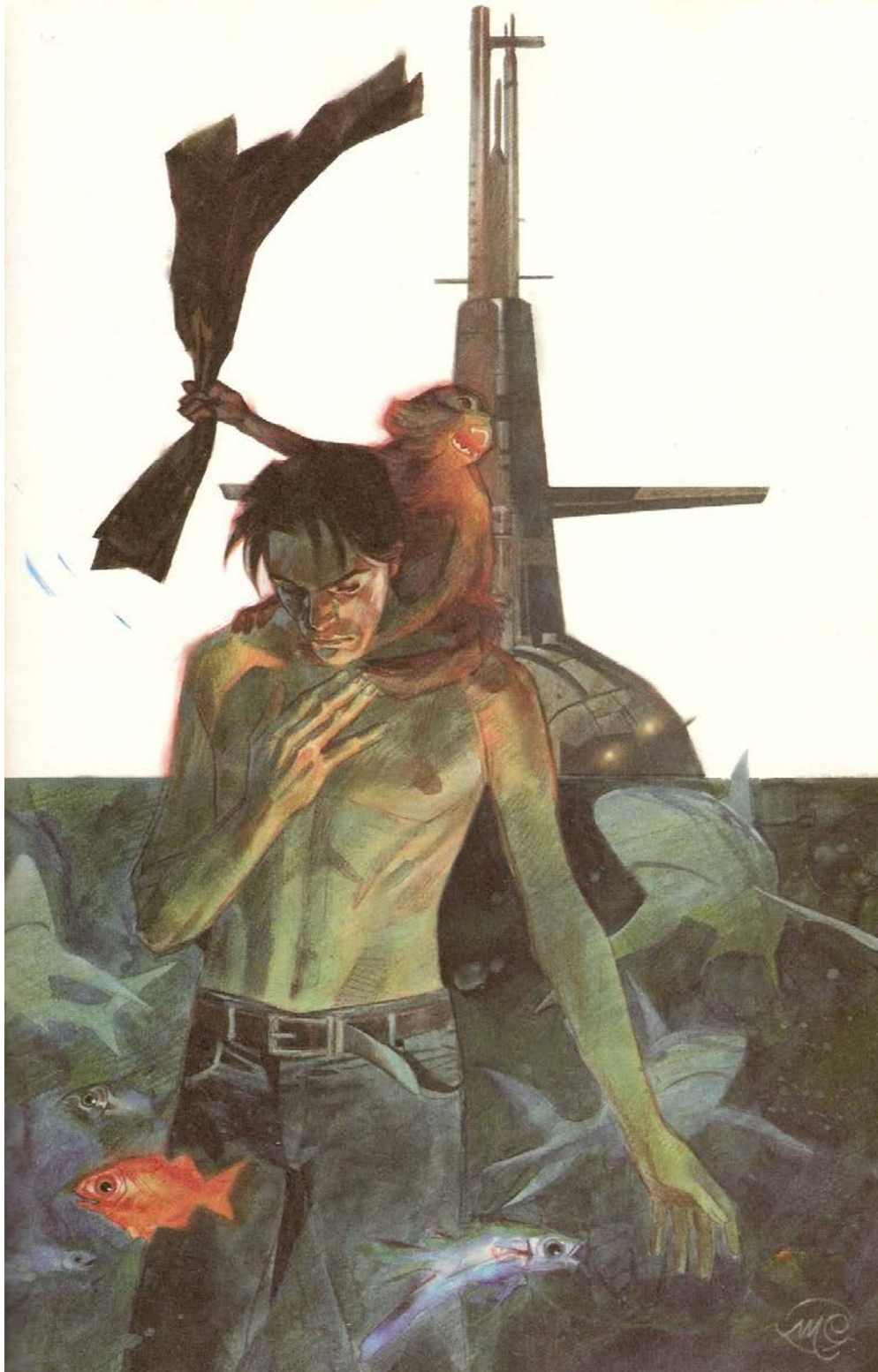
Figure 5.1 – Our first good look at Agent 355.

Figure 5.2 – One of the many artistic cover's of the individual issues included in the graphic novel collections. This one features Yorick's skinny physique, although he does possess more musculature than normally seen.

Figure 5.3 – Yorick, nude, has his masculinity revealed to the world by an enterprising reporter.
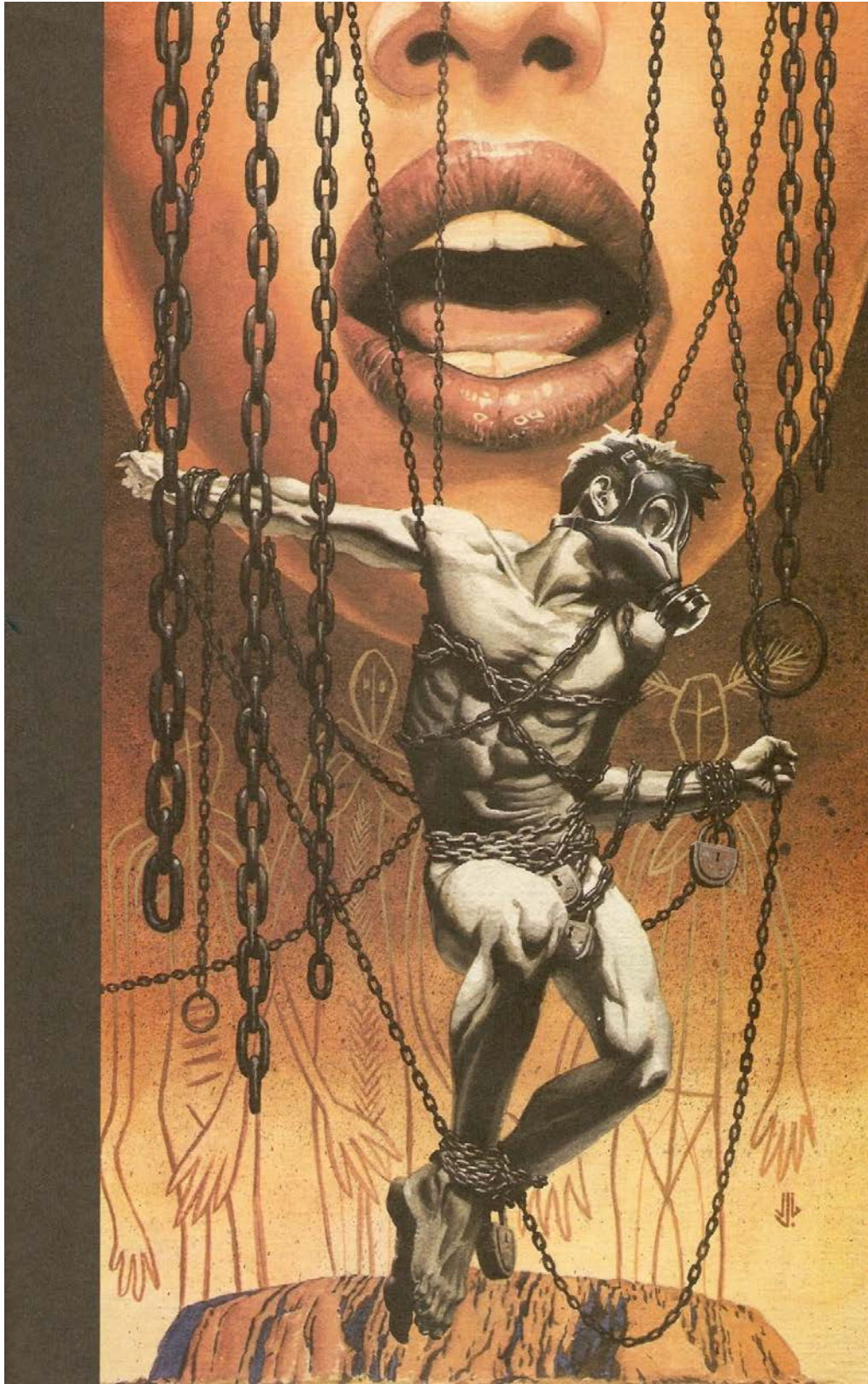
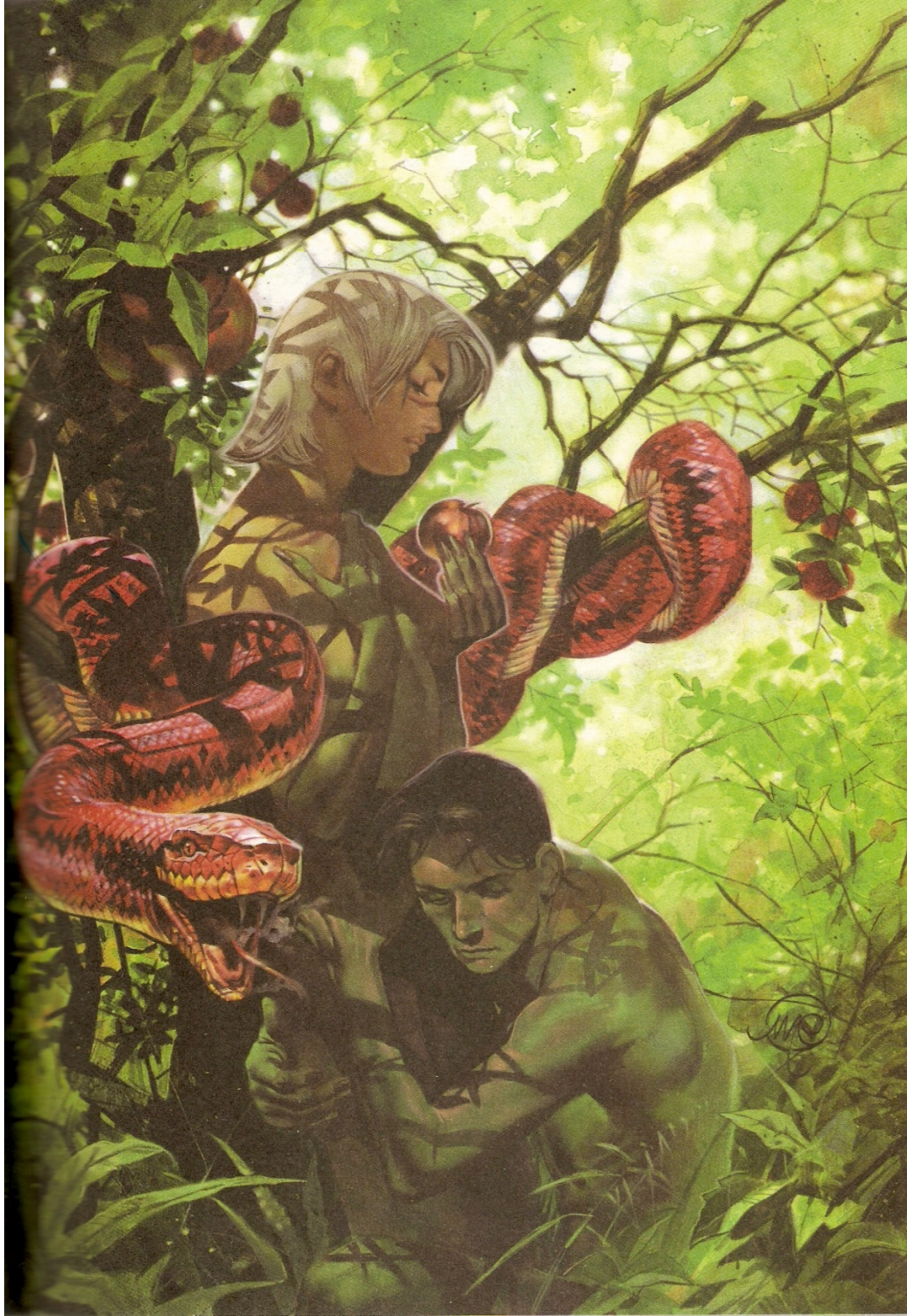Figure 5.4 – More cover art featuring a submissive Yorick.

Figure 5.5 – The cover art for the issue where Yorick conceives a child with Beth II, where he submissively is grasping the covered waist of his lover.

Figure 5.6 – After Beth II pushed Yorick down to seduce him, this is an image of Yorick's unmuscled nude form.

Figure 5.7 – A transgendered Yorick.

Figure 5.8 – Hero, after blindsiding Agent 355, is about to demonstrate her attempts to atone for her past actions. During this period, she has adopted the garb of the traditional American cowboy – even her body's femininity has been deemphasized.

Conclusion

In a discussion of the master-narratives of superhero comics, Douglas Wolk notes an alteration in their political messages in the last two decades:

> It used to be that the good guys did right because they were good people, and the bad guys did wrong because they were greedy or insane or just plain evil…That's now the condescending, cynical political spin on international relations that the American government pumps out on a regular short basis, and superhero-comics writers have made their analysis of "good" and "evil" much more interesting (since the mid-'90s)…Ethical action has become Topic A in the twenty-first-century superhero comics; a lot of the best and most significant ones address the question of means and ends and where they intersect with violence and history and the notion of what constitutes moral action.[1]

While Wolk may be over simplifying the moral and political messages of American comic books, critics are aware of how the medium has been used for multiple political agendas. After all, the most notable catch phrase from the Golden Age of American comics is Superman's struggle for "truth, justice, and the American way."[2] As part of their expansive study on the cultural impact of comics, Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith compare the superhero and war genres of the 1940s and 1950s, citing that "most early comic books in the war genre were not as

---

[1] Wolk, *Reading Comics*, 99-100.

[2] One of the more notable "elseworld," a what-if story format common in comics, stories involving America's champion is *Superman: Red Son* – a comic by acclaimed writer Mark Millar that posits a world where Superman crash landed in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The existence of this comic highlights the incredibly powerful and unquestioningly patriotic nature of the most well known superhero figure and his ties to jingoism.

blatantly racist as the superhero comics [in their depiction of American enemies], but they generally supported the righteousness of the American cause and glorified the act of war."[3] While the authors do not ignore the plethora of anti-war comics during the 1960s and 1970s that portrayed atrocities performed by American soldiers or the victimization of the Vietnamese, they lead their section on propaganda with a quote from Chris Murray who states that "even a brief look at superhero comics from the 1940s leaves little doubt that the genre as a whole fed off of the American government's programme of domestic propaganda [reflecting] the ideology of the dominant power structures and institutions."[4] As Douglas Wolk accounts, however, there is an increasing tendency in recent years in the superhero genre, traditionally comic's most conservative genre, to complicate questions of patriotism and national duty. This is found, most famously, in the Civil War story arc in Marvel's superhero continuity, which casts Iron Man as an abusive, jingoistic American government official forcing a superhero registration act that starkly questions real world American policies, like the Patriot Act of 2001.[5]

This tendency towards undermining a traditional adherence to dominant ideology is continued in the way these comics portray gendered identity. Either drawn with impossible proportions out of some adolescent fantasy or given "lesser" powers than their invulnerable, super strong, physically capable male counterparts (or both), women superheroes (and women in many other comic genres as well) have been given subservient positions.[6] In the last ten years, however, numerous powerful, assertive women figures have found their way to comics shelves:

---

[3]Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics*, 251.

[4] Duncan and Smith, *The Power of Comics, 249.*

[5] Ironically, in Civil War, the Marvel superhero that is a pseudonym for American patriotism, Captain America, stands in opposition of the Mutant Registration Act – citing it as unconstitutional and unpatriotic.

[6] For more information on the subservience of women in comics, see Angela McRobbie's seminal work *Feminism and Youth Culture*.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, herself the subject of dozens of studies exploring her feminist politics, Karolina Dean of the *Runaways* (2003-2009), a teenage alien lesbian struggling with both her racial and sexual identities, and, of course, Dr. Mann and Agent 355 of *Y: the Last Man*.[7] Similarly, there has been a shift in masculine heroes of American comic books, and although the medium is still dominated by figures like Iron Man, Captain America, and Bigby Wolf, there is, as we have seen, a growing allowance for new productions of male identity.

Falling back on the language of Raymond Williams, *Fables*' Bigby Wolf is a representative of the still dominant masculine form found in American comics. Square jawed, powerfully built, and utterly dominant in his dealings, Bigby has all the qualities of a super hero, even if he is influenced by the fairy tale genre, one that traditionally champions clever male heroes over proverbial physical giants. Bigby, though at first in a subservient position to his future wife, rises in importance and mystical strength as the comic continues, and other capable male figures use Bigby as the model to judge their own competency. The Beast, Bigby's replacement as Sheriff of Fabletown, spends the first issues worried about whether he can live up to Bigby's legend, and Boy Blue, though a hero in his own right after his actions against Fabletown's enemies, continues to judge himself of less worth than his hero Bigby. Masculine weakness, or a failure to abide by some sort of hypermasculine ideal, is characterized by physical frailty, as seen in Fabletown's biggest traitor, the bookish and effeminate Ichabod Crane.

Even *Fables*, however, has – in recent years – moved away from strict adherence to this dominant, masculine ideal. The Frog Prince, nicknamed Flycatcher, is a counter example to Bigby's hyperaggressive masculinity. Flycatcher begins the comic as a janitor, broken by his cowardly refusal to accept his wife's death for fear that acknowledging it would force him to

---

[7] While Buffy the Vampire Slayer is more well known as an award winning television show and a campy movie, the character has been featured continuously in comic form (by different authors and publishers) since 1998.

137

return to the Homelands in a futile, and deadly, attempt to regain his honor. He is drawn as a lanky, foolish looking youth, and Flycatcher often bears the brunt of masculine teasing and buffoonish actions. This physically weak male character, however, manages to attain the status of King in his own right through use of non-violent resistance. Unfortunately, Flycatcher has not broken completely away from *Fables* conservative masculine depictions. The more power he assumes, the more physically impressive he is drawn – his shoulders straighten, his chest is proportionately bigger, and the panels are constructed in a way that emphasizes his height over other characters, especially in the panels involving his love interest, Red Riding Hood. While he sticks to his ideas of peace and non-confrontational politics, the most recent graphic novel depicts Flycatcher acknowledging that, as a ruler, he will eventually have to mete out justice – up to and including death – for the long term security and safety of his kingdom's people. While Flycatcher is able to only to exile a murderer instead of killing him, the comic ends with him realizing the difficulty of maintaining his peaceful ideals in a "realistic" setting.

While *Fables* is only recently altering its masculine productions, there are signs of comic's movement towards an acceptance of gender equality espoused by Third Wave feminism in *Preacher*. Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's unabashedly brutal, often violently offensive take on American relationships, both friendship and romantic, skirts the line of a truly transgressive depiction of gender. Tulip O'Hare, whose name seems straight out of cliché detective fiction, is accomplished, clever, and fiercely loyal the same traits valued in traditional stories on masculine friendship. Coupled with their attraction for one another, Jesse Custer and Tulip have, seemingly, a healthy basis for a long lasting and committed relationship. Unfortunately, Jesse spends the entire comic unable to accept Tulip as his partner, investing those feelings into a degenerate vampire who ultimately betrays him. The comic does end, however, with Jesse

admitting his need for Tulip to share equally in all aspects of his life, though it ends with her behind him on his horse as they ride off into a sunset. For every progressive step forward, the comic lurches two back – it is, after all, in the unrealized events after the last page that women are accepted as an equal partner, not in the six years of the comic's production, and she doesn't even get her own horse.

In the last decade, however, there have been numerous comics wherein women's competency has been established since the beginning of the comic -- *Y: the Last Man* is only one of them. Alison Mann, Agent 355, Hero, Representative Jennifer Brown, Beth Deville, Beth II, Natalya, P. J., Rose – this only begins the list of women with complex and well developed personalities and conflicts. *Y: the Last Man*, however, is a comic that is unashamedly about the future of mankind, and it is not found in a muscle-bound ubermensch or a genius scientist, but in an unmotivated geek with an undergraduate degree in English who accepts that he is not anyone's ideal apocalypse survivor. With wit and charm, he earns self confidence, but not at the expense of his position relative to women; he may be brave, but Agent 355 is the better warrior, and he may be intelligent, but Dr. Allison Mann is the better scientist – the two tropes of superhero origin stories. He is comfortable with both dominance and submission, confident in his skills, and willing to admit to his own flaws – mostly.

The one realm of gendered identity in which all of these comics fail, however, is in the depiction of men's relationships to their sexuality, or, more specifically, all of them contain either overt or covert attacks against homosexuality. *Preacher* is the most obvious, with its blatantly horrific portrayals of homosexuals within the comic. Perhaps the most balanced homosexual, outside of the "sexual investigators" Bob Glover and Freddy Allen, is hero cop Paulie Bridges. Paulie appears only in a two issues of *Preacher,* and is first portrayed as an

arrogant, hostile homophobe who verbally lashes out at the homosexuals that he and his partner encounter on their beats. Eventually his own homosexuality is uncovered when his partner busts into his apartment and finds Paulie chained down while being sodomized, which only continues *Preacher*'s conflation of homosexuality and bondage – another sexual outlet that is frequently cited by conservatives as perverted in its own right. The only reason he is considered the most well adjusted is that he ends the comic quitting the force, pleased with living a submissive, homosexual lifestyle that he does not have to hide. This situation, however, only enforces the stereotype that homosexuals (and in relation, those that practice bondage or sadomasochism) are unfit for public service, and Paulie is last seen drooling out of an all-encompassing black leather mask, chains and manacles hanging in the background.

Homosexual pairings are not quite so damaging in *Fables* or *Y: the Last Man*, although only because they receive very little attention. In over 10 years of publication and 100 issues, *Fables* has no incidents of a homosexual or bisexual pairing. In a comic that reimagines Goldilocks in a sexual relationship with the youngest of the three bears, and Snow White delivering a litter of puppies, *Fables* does not shy from queering traditional notions of sexual relationships in the fairy tale world. Cinderella is a sexually promiscuous spy, ala James Bond, and Jack (in a *Fables* spin off comic *Jack of Fables*) manages to sleep with three sisters individually, then pesters them for group sex. *Fables* is not sexually prurient, so it begs the question why it leaves out any relationship that is not heterosexual. *Y: the Last Man*, however, does portray homosexual relationships – it could hardly avoid it in a world populated by only one man. It seems to embrace the idea of lesbianism or bisexuality in women, much like contemporary trends in television and movies, but it fails to consider any healthy male-male relationships even in its flashbacks. It can be understood in a comic with only one man that there

would be no male homosexual or bisexual relationships, but Yorick frequently and aggressively rejects the label when it is applied to him (after all, he does travel for over a year as the only man on earth while refusing to have sex with a woman). The only instance of a male-male homosexual act is one of abuse, which is part of the cause for Yorick's sexual hang-ups.

These are only three of the comics that occupy the comics community, although each are highly regarded with industry awards. While figures like Bigby Wolf, and comics that deny any form of sexual connection outside of the heteronormative like *Fables*, are still prevalent in this last decade – especially in much of the superhero medium – there are an ever increasing number of comics that posit different ways to be a man. This can be found both in the independent press and in the mainstream. *Blankets* by Craig Thompson (2003) is an autobiographical comic about a dreamer dealing with his loss of religious belief, and the Scott Pilgrim series by Brian Lee O'Malley (2004-2010), which was made into a movie in 2010 and lead DVD sales during the first two weeks of its release, have a geeky main character defeating the seven evil exes of his current girlfriend. Both of these characters from independent presses are as far from the square-jawed, muscle bound heroes of Wil Eisner's *The Spirit* or Wolverine. Mainstream Presses, like Vertigo, Icon, and IDW have embraced the physicality and "geeky" traits of its readers, and instead of Peter Parker, who is character of adolescent fantasies (a genius scientist/Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist/superhero with a model wife), we have Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* (2008-2010). Their protagonist, Dave Lizewski, a spindly-limbed teenage boy who wonders why people want to be Paris Hilton and not Spiderman, dresses as a superhero and predictably is put into the hospital during his first dangerous encounter. Even though he is readily overwhelmed, his geek-driven love of the genre forces him back into "the game," which leads to him nearly tortured to death. Unlike his heroes, who have women falling all over them

for their heroism, Dave pretends to be homosexual to attract the attention of a girl, and when his identity is revealed, loses her friendship and is beaten by her new boyfriend. Regardless of the humiliation he endures, Dave ends the comic victorious and confident against those that inflict suffering on others around them. What is important for him is that he, like his comic superheroes, stood up for what was right, and his stance earned him fame, after a video of him defending a mugging victim shouting "I'm not leaving him," even after he was physically brutalized by the muggers.

Comics are beginning to accept that their audiences, who are traditionally seen as socially awkward geeks, want more from their entertainment than escapist fantasy. This is not the first time, though, that there has been an alteration in the medium. The comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s spoke to a generation throwing off the conservative mold of their parents. The 1980s had a comic, *Maus* by Art Spiegalman, win a Pulitzer Prize, and another, *Watchman*, deconstruct the last fifty years of superhero comics and is commonly held as a literary masterpiece. These decades demonstrated that comics can be seen as a valid, literary medium, and this is a fight that is no longer necessary to wage (although there are some comic theorists who still find it necessary to "take up the gauntlet," so to speak). The last few decades have seen an explosion of comics, mainstream, independent, and online, that have expanded the medium into one strongly connected to American identity. And as the needs of the readership change, as the way Americans view masculinity alters, so does the medium.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*: *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

    Nationalism. New York: Verso, 2006. First published in 1983.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006. First published in

    1994.

Braudy, Leo. *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*. New

    York: Knopf, 2003.

Brombert, Victor. *In Praise of Antiheroes*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.

Brooker, Will. *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson: U of

    Mississippi P, 2000.

Brown, Lyndsay. "Yorick, Don't Be a Hero: Productive Motion in *Y: the Last Man*."

    ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies 3.1 (2006):

    http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v3_1/brown.

Burns, Edward McNall. *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and*

    Destiny. Westport: Greenwood, 1973.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge,

    2006. First published in 1990.

Calabrese, Andrew and Barbara Ruth Burke. "American Identities: Nationalism, the Media, and

    the Public Sphere." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 16.2 (1992): 52-73.

Carey, Mike. *Lucifer: A Dalliance with the Damned*. New York: Vertigo Press, 2002.

---. *Lucifer: The Divine Comedy*. New York: Vertigo Press, 2003.

Carrier, David. "Caricature," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent

      Worcester, 105-115. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Clarkson, Alexander. "Virtual Heroes: Boys, Masculinity and Historical Memory in War Comics

      1945 – 1995," *Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies* 2.2 (Fall 2008): 175-185.

Connell, Robert W. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford:

      Stanford UP, 1987.

_____. *Masculinities.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995.

Coogan, Peter *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Austin: MonekyBrain, 2006.

Duncan, Randy and Matthew J. Smith. *The Power of Comics: History, Form, & Culture.* New

      York: Continuum, 2009.

Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Plume, 1991. First

      published in 1981.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary

      Cartoonist*. 1985. Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.

Ennis, Garth and Steve Dillon. *Gone to Texas*. New York: Vertigo, 1996.

-----. *Until the End of the World*. New York: Vertigo, 1997.

-----. *Proud Americans*. New York: Vertigo, 1997.

-----. *Ancient History*. New York: Vertigo, 1998.

-----. *Dixie Fried*. New York: Vertigo, 1998.

-----. *War in the Sun*. New York: Vertigo, 1999.

-----. *Salvation*. New York: Vertigo, 1999.

-----. *All Hell's A-Coming*. New York: Vertigo, 2000.

-----. *Alamo*. New York: Vertigo, 2001.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22-27.

Fussell, Paul. *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*. New York:

> Oxford UP, 1989.

Gleason, Philip. "Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of American Identity." *The*

> *Review of Politics* 43 (1981): 483-518.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret.* Edited by J.

> K. Moorhead. Translated by John Oxenford. Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 1998.

Gordon, Ian. *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture: 1890-1945*. Washington: Smithsonian IP,

> 1998.

Goulart, Ron. *Over Fifty Years of American Comic Books*. New York: Facts on File, 1991.

Grandstaff, Mark R. "Visions of New Men: The Heroic Soldier Narrative in American

> Advertisements During World War II." *Advertising and Society Review* 5, no. 2 (2004).
>
> http://muse.jhu.edu.spot.lib.auburn.edu/journals/advertising_and_society_review/
>
> v005/5.2grandstaff.html (accessed May 1, 2007).

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. New York: Harper, 2008. First published 1970 by

> McGraw Hill.

Groensteen, Thierry. *The System of Comics*. Translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen.

> Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007.

---. "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?," in *A Comics Studies Reader*,

> edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, 3-11. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Harvey, R.C. "How Comics Came to Be: Through the Juncture of Word and Image from

> Magazine Gag Cartoons to Newspaper Strips, Tools for Critical Appreciation plus Rare

Seldom Witnessed Historical Facts," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer
and Kent Worcester, 25-45. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Hatfield, Charles. "An Art of Tensions," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and
Kent Worcester, 132-148. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Hill, Joe and Gabriel Rodriguez. *Locke & Key: Welcome to Lovecraft*. Korea: IDW, 2008.

Heer, Jeet and Kent Worcester, eds. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Jameson, Fredric. "Metacommentary." *PMLA* 86, no. 1(1971): 9-18.

_____. *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986, vol. 1, Situations of Theory*. Minneapolis:
U of Minneapolis P, 1988.

Jarvis, Christina S. *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II*. DeKalb:
Northern Illinois UP, 2004.

Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington:
Indiana UP, 1989.

_____. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, 2nd ed. New York: Rutgers,
1993.

Johnson, Mat and Warren Pleece. *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*. New York: Vertigo, 2009.

Kading, Terry. "Drawn into 9/11, But Where Have All the Superheroes Gone?" *Comics as
Philosophy*. edited by Jeff McLaughlin. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2005. 207-227.

Katz, Jon. *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet Out of Idaho.* New York: Villard, 2000.

Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture*.

Kleinfeld, Judith and Andrew Kleinfeld. "Cowboy Nation and American Character." *Society*
41.3 (2004): 43-50.

Kunzle, David. *The Early Comic Strip: Picture Stories and Narrative Strips in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.

---. *The History of the Comic Strip, Vol II.: The Nineteenth Century.* Berkeley : U of California P, 1990.

Lehman, Peter. *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.

---. *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Levy, Emanuel. *John Wayne: Prophet of the American Way of Life*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1988.

Lopes, Paul. *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009.

Magelssen, Scott. "Remapping American-ness: Heritage Production and the Staging of the Native American and the African American as Other in 'Historyland'." *National Identities* 4 (2002): 161-178.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper, 1994.

McIlvenny, Paul. "The Disabled Male Body "Writes/Draws Back": Graphic Fictions of Masculinity and the Body in the Autobiographical Comic *The Spiral Cage*." Edited by Nancy Tuana, William Cowling, Maurice Hamington, Greg Johnson, and Terrance MacMullan, 100-124. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002.

McRobbie, Angela. *Feminism and Youth Culture.* New York: Rutledge, 1991.

Millar, Mark and John Romita, Jr. *Kick-Ass*. New York: Marvel, 2010.

Mitchell, W. J. T. "Beyond Comparison," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, 116-123. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Moore, Alan. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 2008. First published in 1986-1987.

Morrison, Grant. *Animal Man,* Vol. 1. New York: DC Comics, 1991.

Murray, Chris. "Propaganda: Superhero Comics and Propaganda in World War Two," in *Comics &Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics,* edited by Anne Manussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen, 1410156. Cophenhagen: Museum Tusculanum P, 2000.

Noon, David Hoogland. "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2004): 339-364.

Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: A History of the Comics Code.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998.

Oakley, Glenn. "Historical Overview." In *Wolf!*, edited by Wolves in American Culture Committee, 1-7. Ashland: NorthWord, 1986.

Pustz, Matthew J. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1999.

Reynolds, Richard. *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.

Rhoades, Shirrel. *A Complete History of American Comic Books.* New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

Rosenkranz, Patrick. *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution*. Seattle, Fantagraphics, 2008.

Rotundo, E. Anthony. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

Sarris, Andrew. "Foreward." In *John Wayne: Prophet of the American Way of Life*, by Emanuel Levy, ix-xiv. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1988.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2008. First
    published in 1990.

Schiller, Herbert. *Mass Communications and the American Empire*. Boulder: Westview Press,
    1992. First published in 1969 by Augustus M. Kelley Pub.

Shelley, Mary. *The Last Man*. New York: Dover, 2010. First published in 1833.

Simone, Gail. "Women in Refrigerators." http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.
    New York: Atheneum, 1992.

_____. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*.
    Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1973.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1997.

Steffen, Jerome O. "Cycles of Myth Restoration: One Approach to Understanding American
    Culture." *Journal of American Culture* 16 (1993): 25-33.

Tabachnick, Stephen E. "Of *Maus* and Memory: The Structure of Art Spielgelman's Graphic
    Novel of the Holocaust," *Word & Image* 9.2 (Apr-Jun 1993): 154-162.

Time. "The Press: Horror Comics." May, 3, 1954. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/
    0,9171,890928,00.html (accessed, January 4, 2010).

Thompson, Craig. *Blankets*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2003.

Tuana, Nancy, William Cowling, Maurice Hamington, Greg Johnson, and Terrance MacMullan.
    Revealing Male Bodies. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002.

Vaughn, Brian K. and Pia Guerra. *Y: the Last Man – Unmanned*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Cycles*. New York: DC Comics, 2003.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – One Small Step*. New York: DC Comics, 2004.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Safeword.* New York: DC Comics, 2004.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Ring of Truth.* New York: DC Comics, 2005.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Girl on Girl.* New York: DC Comics, 2005.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Paper Dolls.* New York: DC Comics, 2006.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Kimono Dragons.* New York: DC Comics, 2006.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Motherland.* New York: DC Comics, 2007.

_____. *Y: the Last Man – Whys and Wherefores.* New York: DC Comics, 2008.

Wertham, Frederic. *The Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Main Road Books, 1996. First
    published in 1954.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

Willingham, Bill. *1001 Nights of Snowfall*. New York: DC Comics, 2006.

_____. *Homelands*. New York: DC Comics, 2005.

_____. *Legends in Exile*. New York: DC Comics, 2002.

_____. *March of the Wooden Soldiers*. New York: DC Comics, 2004.

_____. *The Mean Seasons*. New York: DC Comics, 2005.

_____. *Storybook Love*. New York: DC Comics, 2004.

_____. *Wolves*. New York: DC Comics, 2006.

Wills, Gary. *John Wayne: The Politics of Celebrity*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1999.

Witek, Joseph. "The Arrow and the Grid," in *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and
    Kent Worcester, 149-156. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2009.

Wolk, Douglas. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge:
    Da Capo, 2007.

Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*.

    Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.