

The Sand/wo/man:
The Unstable Worlds of Gender in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* Series

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Introduction¹

As the 25th anniversary of Neil Gaiman's groundbreaking *Sandman* approaches, a new critical reading of queerness in the series becomes relevant to our contemporary notions of gender theory. During its eight-year run, *Sandman* became one of the most popular, significant, and award-winning comics in history. To date, it is the only comic to win the World Fantasy Award, and it is one of the only comics to be on the *New York Times* bestseller's list. Given *Sandman*'s history, it is no surprise that a number of critics and fans have published broad analyses of the mythology, the writing, and the narrative of the graphic series (e.g. Castaldo; Elder; Indick; Laity; Rauch; Reed; Sanders; Saxton; Sharkey). Yet, few detailed studies have been conducted which examine some of the deeper ideological components of *Sandman*, and how they can be applied to contemporary pedagogy.

The *Sandman* graphic novel series follows Dream, a deity-like being, as he searches for purpose and identity following a 70-year imprisonment by an occultist. The reader is introduced to Dream's six siblings (known collectively as The Endless) who are also deity-like beings, representative of and responsible for major aspects of human experience: Death, Delirium (formerly Delight), Despair, Destruction, Destiny, and Desire. Gaiman's saga tells a tale of familial responsibility, self-identification, and aging, illuminating these issues' interconnectedness. *Sandman*, however, does not take place solely in the realms of the Endless. Gaiman depicts Dream and his siblings existing in the mortal realm and interfering in the lives of humans. Human characters in the stories are equally as important as the Endless siblings. Indeed,

Gaiman draws many parallels between mortals and the Endless, ending the series with Dream's death. His son takes up the responsibilities of heading the Dream Realm, and the reader is led to believe that the Endless family carries on with their duties after mourning, as mortals must do when a loved one dies.

Of particular interest in *Sandman* is the way that Gaiman renegotiates the traditional notions of gender in society and presents a practical representation of the same type of theoretical gender fluidity developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Although it's doubtful that Gaiman deliberately referenced Butlerian theory in his graphic novel, both authors do seem to have a similar agenda in terms of queer theory revisionism. Indeed, Gaiman's work, written around the same time as Butler published her influential treatise on gender performativity, illustrates the notion that sex and gender are social constructs which inherently lead to ideological oppression. To overcome this oppression, society must examine and tear down these constructs, which have become basic to our identities and seem innate to the human condition. But, as both Gaiman and Butler argue, gender appearances are little more than artificial constructs. Butler argues a deconstruction of gender is possible only when people perform outside of long-standing prescribed norms. It is not a call to form new constructs; rather, it is a call to do away with any fixed concepts of what it means to be male or female at all. The gender-bending subversion that Butler advocates in a scholarly tone Gaiman depicts in graphic form, casting aside the shroud of academia and making the theory accessible to a larger population.

It is for this reason that the *Sandman* series becomes an important pedagogical artifact. Teaching gender and queer theory is a difficult proposition, made even more complex by the dense writing of Butler and other contemporary theorists. In the classroom, students often find exemplars more elucidating than pure theory. In this way, *Sandman* serves as a paradigm of

complex Butlerian theory, made accessible through the graphic novel medium. *Sandman* should not supplant Butler, but rather should supplement and exemplify the queer theory she espouses. The *Sandman* series acts in parallel to Butler's project, perhaps a reflection of social politics of the time. It should be noted that there is no evidence that Gaiman deliberately *reflects* Butler's treatise, but rather *Sandman* seems to follow an analogous track, arguing for a queer performativity. Ultimately, while Butler gives a nuanced but opaque reading of gender, Gaiman presents his ideas in a more accessible and concrete manner, providing readers with a pictorial representation that aids in clarifying the dense prose of Butlerian theory. Gaiman brings a theory aimed at scholars into the mainstream, extending its reach from the esoteric to the straightforward.

Gender and Sex in Butler and Gaiman

One of the most obvious connections an instructor can make in the classroom between Gaiman's work and queer theory is the way Gaiman's characters normalize queerness. The word "queer" here is reflective of queer theory/gender theory—namely, someone described as queer does not conform to the gender norms informed by a masculine-feminine binary, which rests on a presumed heterosexuality (and heteronormativity). While queerness colloquially refers to homosexuality, in queer studies the term to describe characters who identify with any sexuality and who deliberately *perform* their identities. Mary Borsellino writes that the characters in *Sandman* do not simply "reinforce gender stereotypes. Rather, they do the opposite. Some of his characters are male, and some are female, but they're all people" (52). Gaiman, as Borsellino notes, is not trying to shock his audience with his portrayal of gender. Rather, the realism of his character development owes much to the cultural normalization of "queer." In other words,

Gaiman represents queerness as a natural act simply because queerness has become more normal in contemporary society. No one adheres perfectly to gender norms, and Gaiman's portrayal of this truth is unapologetic. One can see one's own queerness, and better understand that of others, in Gaiman's characters. His characterizations reflect the reality the reader encounters in his or her own life. Although Borsellino acknowledges and accepts this normalization, she doesn't scrutinize it past her analysis of *Sandman*. However, it's important to realize that Gaiman's work with gender has implications beyond the textuality of the graphic novel.

Gaiman's abstraction of gender in *Sandman* allows the reader to identify with the characters, regardless of respective sex categories or gender identifications. In Scott McCloud's influential *Understanding Comics*, he explains how the abstraction of characters' appearances in comics can make the characters more relatable to the reader. The fewer distinct features an image has, the easier it is for the viewer to identify with the character it represents. One can project one's own perception of one's likeness onto a starkly drawn figure (McCloud 28-37). Taking McCloud's analysis of abstraction beyond his focus on *image*, the readers of *Sandman* can see the characters as representational of *concepts* which shift and alter depending on audience. McCloud's theory of abstraction, therefore, features in Gaiman's work not simply in the way the characters are drawn, but also in their gender performances. By writing characters without strictly defined gender performances, Gaiman creates infinitely relatable characters. Even the minor human characters of the story abstract their own constructs. The evolving feminism of young character Barbie represents a shifting conception of gender within relationships. The immortal Hob Gadling abstract the idea of finality. The molecularly unstable Element Girl illustrate fluidity in identity presentation. Gaiman seems to concentrate his work on how the

relationship between an abstract *character* and an abstract *concept* can represent larger cultural issues.

The Endless are another obvious example. A group of seven supernatural deity-like creatures who have existed before the gods were created and will exist until the end of time, the Endless are anthropomorphic representations of ethereal aspects of human existence,. Gaiman names this septet “The Endless” as if remarking on the endless cyclicity of identity construction, a distinct feature of both Judith Butler’s gender project and Erving Goffman’s notions of identity performance. Goffman argues that all identity management fits into “a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” (*Presentation* 8). Of the cyclical nature of gender in particular, Butler notes that “the very feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” and argues that any system of analysis creates a recursive structure of self-definition (3).

The idea of “abstraction” within the graphic novel is in concert with a Butlerian view of gender and sex categories. In the tradition of feminist thinkers, Butler argues against a biological essentialism that separates people into two sex categories. The idea that reproductive organs should be the basic distinction among a race of creatures places undue value on these organs. Consequently, biological distinctions between male and female become instrumental in the classification and delineation of *difference* (after all, why is it sexuality and not, say, hair color that we culturally use to distinguish groups of people from each other?). This form of biological determinism is the foundation of the oppression and subjugation Butler’s feminism resists. By obstructing the “rules” of gender, the constructs we associate with sexual traits become abstracted, weakening the inherent hierarchy of the gender binary. People can relate to one

another in a truer “natural” manner than one informed by sex category and correlating social rank.

The nature of a graphic text like *Sandman* engages the reader’s imagination in a very immediate, albeit complex, way, presenting a more accessible message despite its depth. In the classroom, it is easier (and more relatable) to teach the concept of performativity using *Sandman* than it is using Butler. Gaiman’s character Barbie is a relevant example of this “natural” manner of socializing as a result of fluid gender performativity. When Barbie is first introduced as a minor character in *The Doll’s House*, she seems to be a stereotypical heterosexual female; a living version of the eponymous doll. The Barbie from *The Doll’s House* acts in accordance to the patriarchal norms ascribed to a person born female, adopting the *gendered* characteristics of her sex as her identity. For example, she is subservient to her husband (appropriately named Ken), is quiet when in a crowd of people, and meek. She is also what mainstream culture would call traditionally gorgeous: blonde hair, buxom, and thin. When she reappears as a main character in *A Game of You*, she has undergone a transformation. Barbie is no longer an archetype of femininity; her gender performance has become more fluid. She asserts herself and is no longer afraid to speak her mind. Indeed, she even leads a party into the dream world to defeat the Cuckoo, her arch nemesis. All these are masculine traits of authority yet she remains archetypically feminine in her beauty. The Barbie in *A Game of You* acts more authentically, creating her identity with each action she takes. Gaiman makes plain Butler’s corollary of gender as action rather than attribute: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 34). Using Barbie, Gaiman presents a dynamic manifestation of the concept of gender performativity in action, in a format made understandable to a plurality of readers.

Another characteristic of Gaiman's dynamic representation of gender is his use of transgendered, homosexual, and amorphous-gendered characters, each of whom contradicts a culturally-presumed heteronormativity. At the same time, however, Gaiman also uses these characters to illustrate a return to gender norms, as if to show how deeply embedded in our culture such norms are. With this dual representation, Gaiman seems poised to offer both a critique of gender norms as well as a realization that our society is still a long way from universal acceptance. For example, one character in *A Game of You* viscerally reflects the schism between gender individuality and the conservatism of gender-roles in society. In *A Game of You*, Wanda is a pre-op male-to-female transgendered character who identifies and lives as a woman. She has breasts and takes hormones but has not had sexual reassignment surgery. In the book, the female characters embark on a mystical journey by harnessing the moon's power. Wanda must stay behind while the other four female characters go to a different plane, because the moon does not see Wanda as woman. Gaiman received some criticism for this but explained in a 1999 interview:

lots of readers assumed that that was my position too, because who could argue with an opinion shared by an ancient witch and a lunar god? In fact, my feeling was always that that's an opinion the gods can take up their sacred recta. I feel the story makes clear that Wanda considers herself a woman; and that, at the end, Death does too. To my mind, that's all that matters. (Bender 126)

Through the prohibition of Wanda's moon-travel, Gaiman presents the conflict between socially-constructed gender and self-constructed gender as an aspect of a lived existence.

In the same book, Hazel, one half of a lesbian couple, has a one-night stand with a man, resulting in her pregnancy. This queerness belies a supposed rigidity of sexuality. Hazel's

heterosexual intercourse does not negate her identification as a lesbian; yet having a lesbian become pregnant is an overt play with sexual norms on Gaiman's part, as pregnancy is a heteronormative practice. Hazel's conversation with Barbie about the affair, however, *does* speak to conventional gender norms. Hazel confesses she did not believe she'd get pregnant since they had sex standing up. Barbie tells Hazel, "When it comes to sex ... well, don't ever believe anything a guy says. Guys think with their dorks" (*Game of You* 47). This juxtaposition of Hazel's contrary behavior with a heteronormative conversation provides a contrast that highlights the gender discord at hand. While Hazel's experimentation and resultant pregnancy can be read as a Butlerian act of sexual subversion, the conversation between the two women serves as a display of the gender binary her actions work against. Hazel's confusion emphasizes the complexity which arises when society clings to archaic expectations in a more liberal modern age—a complexity visualized by Gaiman with a clear, understandable, graphical presentation.

Gender-play is at work in areas other than character development, including the overarching structure of the story. As a graphic novel series, *Sandman* was originally told in individual issues released once a month. These issues (75 in total) represented a whole story, although that story was not presented in strict chronological order. Additionally, each issue was later collected into volumes, each of which contained the individual stories. For example, the *A Game of You* is the fifth volume of the series, collecting issues #32-37. It tells the story of a group of women who search for a missing friend in the dream world. However, it also fits within the larger framework of *The Sandman* uber-narrative, as it contributes to the on-going story of Dream, Barbie, and Thessaly.

This graphic novel structure, the reified "story," is a huge part of *Sandman*, and much has been written about structure and use of the story in the series by authors such as Rauch and

Sharkey. The overarching story of *Sandman* centers on the character Dream, who embarks on a series of quests informed by his fidelity to responsibility until he wearsies completely and dies. However, the structure of the grand story strays from the typical phallogentric style—conflict, rising action, climax/resolution, denouement. In an essay which reads *Sandman* through Lacanian and Derridean lenses, Rodney Sharkey describes plot events in the series' stories as seeming "to be linear and chronological but which always reflect back upon themselves to the site of an intense difference ... In other words, *Sandman* succeeds in challenging patriarchal discourse, and the narratives that it incubates, by interrogating notions of story, narrative, and dream, and thus playing with the centrality of phallogentric authority" (¶4). The idea of masculine and feminine stories can also be seen in the work of John Fiske, who writes that television texts are particularly gendered, where feminine narratives "resist narrative closure" and masculine narratives "are structured to produce greater narrative and ideological closure" (179, 198).

This narrative interrogation is akin to Butler's gender subversion. By poking and prodding at that which we accept as the proper way to do something—in this case, tell a story—that thing's authority weakens and its potential opens up. Whereas the standard linear rise and fall of plot action is masculine, reflection and cyclicity as a method of storytelling is feminine, as discussed by Judith Roof in her *Come, As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. In an interview with Hal Bender, Gaiman acknowledges that he intended to oscillate story collections from male-centric to female-centric and back again. "*Sandman* was always designed to move from male stories to female stories. *Preludes & Nocturnes* is a guy's tale ... the next book, *The Doll's House*, is fundamentally Rose Walker's tale ... The following book, *Season of Mists*, is again a Sandman story ... And then there's *A Game of You*, which is about women, fantasy, and identity"

(qtd in Bender 117). Gaiman's structuring of the narrative plays with these gender boundaries in a more abstract, but equally powerful, way.

Identity Performance in Gaiman

Yet *Sandman*'s gender complexity points to the difficulty in completely eschewing the gender binary in which our culture is entrenched. Such a conscious attempt at maintaining a balance between the two is self-defeating, just as it also serves as a reinforcement of the binary distinction. Teaching queer theory involves working through these seemingly contradictory themes, a task *Sandman* makes easier. A conversation between two of the Endless, Desire and Despair, illustrates an unconscious adherence to this seemingly-innate gender binary, through the representation of the siblings. Of particular note in the depiction of the Endless is Gaiman's separation of the elder three from the younger four siblings: for example, Despair tells Desire, "the elder three don't play our little games" (*A Doll's House* 44). In *Gender Advertisements*, Erving Goffman finds a similarity between the subjugated status of children and women:

[In] our society whenever a male has dealings with a female or a subordinate male (especially a younger one), some mitigation of potential distance, coercion, and hostility is quite likely to be induced by application of the parent-child complex.

Which implies that, ritually speaking, females are equivalent to subordinate males and both are equivalent to children. (5)

Dividing the Endless siblings in such a way—three older entities who frown on the light-hearted attitudes of four younger entities—can be read as a nod to Goffman's claim. The younger of the Endless need to be overseen by their dutiful, masculine elders. In this way, they are the subjugated feminine half of the Endless. Despair seems to have accepted this as her given role in

the family and uses her perceived status as justification for her depression and anger towards her elder relatives (see, *Brief Lives* 25).

Adherence to a determined role in any social structure is crucial to Erving Goffman's concept of identity performance. Goffman, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, asserts that in all social interactions, there are established roles to be played. Through our life experience and media consumption, we become intimately familiar with these roles—almost on an instinctual level—and they duly inform our actions and reception of others' actions. The dramaturgical metaphor Goffman writes is prescriptive and rigid, a social guidebook of sorts. Goffman does not suggest we do away with these defined roles; rather we should understand how they work and use that understanding to work within them (17-77).

Further, Goffman discusses the idea that one can better understand others through self-examination, and vice versa. Goffman lays out a theory of impression management and the implications of seeing the forces at work in social interactions:

When performers make a slip of some kind, clearly exhibiting a discrepancy between the fostered impression and a disclosed reality, the audience may tactfully 'not see' the slip or readily accept the excuse that is offered for it. And at moments of crisis for the performers, the whole audience may come into tacit collusion with them in order to help them out. (231-2)

Ultimately, the feeling of Otherness is lessened when the audience is reminded that they are witness to a fictive performance and not stark reality. When the audience relates to the experience of the performer just as they, too, are performers. A reduction of Otherness means the oppressive effect of a social hierarchy is also diminished, bringing a power balance to the parties involved. While Goffman's view is static and conservative, Butler espouses a dynamic ideal in

which there are no limits and no prescribed ways to act. Butler urges a constant *doing* and *becoming*, a Nietzschean subjectless process (34). Gender, Butler writes, “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). Gender, in this way, is a process rather than a role we accept. Butler’s performance is an active doing: a developing process of iteration and reiteration with no fixed end. Butler’s subversive gender performances are possible only when the performers are aware of their agency. In this way, Butler picks up where Goffman left off, instructing society on what to do with the knowledge that all social interactions are constructed.

Desire and Destruction: The Endless

This identity play becomes obvious through Gaiman’s depiction of Desire, a member of the Endless family, who is an obvious character to consider when teaching gender performance through *Sandman*. Desire displays Butler’s idea of the constant *doing* of gender, the endless process of becoming. Desire’s perceived gender never sticks and is not substantive. Neither is his/her sex static. When appearing in the mortal realm, Desire becomes the most appropriate sex a given situation calls for, which often presumes a heteronormative relationship. That is not to say Desire is hermaphroditic but rather is sex-shifting. Desire’s realm is The Threshold, a larger-than-life effigy of Desire him/herself in which he/she resides, womb-like. In the realms of the Endless, Desire appears as an androgynous being, often with soft, feminine features but no clear sex markers. However, Desire has also fathered a mortal. Despite this constant state of flux (which in itself is a feminine quality), Desire possesses a masculine sense of absolutism and control.

At the end of *The Doll's House*, for example, Dream and Desire discuss their family's role in interacting with mortals. Dream insists The Endless serve the living, while Desire argues otherwise. "Human beings are the creatures of desire. They twist and bend as I require it," Desire muses. "If I thought otherwise, I would crack, like Delirium; or I would abandon my realm, like our lost brother [Destruction]" (227). With this statement, Desire makes it clear that it is in his/her nature to play puppetmaster rather than to be puppet. He/she is an authority, not a subordinate. When this masculine perspective is coupled with a feminine fixation on love and romance, the reader is presented not just with the physicality of an amorphous sexuality but also with fluid cultural characteristics of a queer gender. Desire is nothing if not a Butlerian ideal.

For Butler, and indeed for post-structuralists in general, the act of defining something limits its potentiality because it plays into an inherent binarism, an exclusionary mode of thought. As Gunkel describes, thinking outside a binary takes advantage of areas that are 'in between or in/at the margins of a traditional metaphysical opposition' (204). The goal of Butler's work is first to illuminate the social/cultural constructions of sex and gender and then to incite subversion that weakens such constructs. Ideally, Butler would eliminate the male-female binary and the hegemonic order generated by such a system (1-46). If sex and gender are at the core of how one identifies oneself, Butler and Gaiman show how one's identity is an ever-changing process over which one has agency, rather than a substantive quality one possesses.

Gaiman's character Destruction, one of the Endless, speaks to the limitations of definition. In a conversation with Dream explaining why he decided to abandon the family, Destruction demonstrates the duality of each sibling's seemingly singular identity: "Our sister [Death] defines life, just as Despair defines hope, or Desire defines hatred, or as Destiny defines freedom" (*Brief Lives* 208). By being named, the subject also becomes distinguished from all

that it is not named, thus limiting its potential to change, alter, or adjust. Because it is this, it is not that. Butler explores this Derridean idea in her attack on “women” as the subject of feminism. “If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” (4).

In abandoning his family, Destruction opens himself up to his potential as a creator, trying his hand at different artistic pursuits. “I filled my role more than adequately for over ten billion years. A two-sided coin: destruction is needed. Nothing new can exist without destroying the old” (Gaiman, *Brief Lives* 208). By shirking his responsibilities as one of the Endless—indeed destroying his former identity—Destruction creates a new role for himself. This new role of creator, however, is simply the other side of the “two-sided coin” that is “Destruction.” He is now the aspect he had been defined as not being but which was part of him all along. Destruction and creation go hand-in-hand. When a building is razed, a pile of rubble is created. When an artist first lays paint to canvas, the purity of the workspace is destroyed. Destruction had been a creator all along, without realizing it, just as he continues both to destroy through his creations and to create destruction. For example, of all the Endless, Destruction is the only character to illustrate a penchant for creation: in *Brief Lives* he cooks elaborate meals and fashions paintings, sculptures, and other works of art. Yet, he describes these activities as acts of *destruction* just as much as they are acts of *creation*—as he says of the “art” of cooking, “one takes raw materials...and one transforms them, by the simple application of a knife, some heat, some judicious mixing, into something miraculously other” (158). Similarly, in an argument about art with his friend, dog Barnabas, Destruction describes his artistic ambitions to create a sculpture.

Barnabas replies that he has “no desire to ruin a perfectly good piece of marble” (159). Creation and destruction go hand-in-hand.

Similarly, each of the Endless confuses a culturally-projected binarism. Dream exists only because we must have a reality. We cannot know Despair without also being free of misery. Who is to say who is Delirious if one has no definition of sanity? In constructing this series of oppositions, Gaiman enacts a similar mode of discourse as the deconstructionism presented in Derridean thought. For Derrida, with whom Butler is often grouped as a deconstructionist (a term, however, neither of them sought), the analysis of any text, be it literary or cultural, is based on inherent contradictions. To claim a deconstructionist reading is to describe ways in which specific texts constitute systems without inherent meaning, and to describe paradoxical or ironic practices that come from those systems that are taken as normative. Derrida’s classic example is *différance*: that which breaks the boundary between what we say and what we mean. In *Sandman*, Destruction is both an act and a representation of that act; yet, he is also his opposite, creation. To analyze this fluidity is to deconstruct critically the meaning in the text: what Derrida describes as “a double gesture, a double science, a double writing” of theory (“Signature” 21). Ultimately, the presentation of each of the Endless by Gaiman represents a deconstructionist notion of these seemingly innate human traits, one predicated on a complex knowledge of an inherent anti-binarism in cultural theory. Yet Gaiman’s analysis is nothing short of clear, representing the complex theory in well-defined, understandable, and teachable terms.

Conclusion: Using Gaiman to Teach Butler

Throughout *Sandman*, Gaiman offers a number of well-illustrated critiques of gender roles and sexual norms and becomes an advocate for a queer lifestyle. That he does so at the

same time as Judith Butler is writing her influential *Gender Trouble* speaks to the cultural zeitgeist of the era. But whereas Butler's writing is dense, awkward, and difficult to understand, Gaiman presents the same issues with a more clear comprehensible outlook. Difficult ideas should not be "dumbed down." But in a very practical sense, obscuring issues with dense prose hinders wide acceptance of the sort of revolutionary ideas that Butler writes. Teaching Butler is a daunting proposition; not because of her ideas but because of her style.

In describing the processes by which gender traits become associated with sexual characteristics—as well as the nature of gender discrimination—Butler's academic tone can be distracting, obscuring the point she's trying to make. While it's certainly not necessary for an academic to be a fluid and engaging writer, the more dense the prose, the more diffuse the audience who will appreciate the material. While a reaction to a complex and nuanced topic may require a certain level of density, Butler's prose clouds the issue more than it elucidates. Other scholars have also noted the opacity of Butler. Martha Nussbaum in her "The Professor of Parody" argues that Butler's prose is mere "verbal and symbolic politics," with little substance behind it (¶4).ⁱⁱ She also highlights the importance of one of Butler's main claims—the need to subvert the social construction of gender and sex. While Nussbaum deems this claim valid, she finds Butler's methods of enacting it to be suspect, both because of inactivity on the part of the performer and also because of a dearth of clarity in Butler's writing. For Nussbaum, Butler's hopeful self-focused subversion and parody is read as a silent acceptance that her idealized genderless society is impossible. The unconscious return to a diametric power structure among the Endless speaks to this defeated ideal of equalized authority. It isn't quite so fruitless and narcissistic as Nussbaum paints it, however. Self-examination can lead to better understanding of oneself, and eventually of others. Nussbaum calls for a feminism which is more active in terms

of social justice and more instructive about how to achieve equality. Butler's feminism is certainly more of a personal and introspective approach than a humanitarian appeal, but this shouldn't be taken as an all-bad situation.

At the same time, Nussbaum articulates simply how difficult it is to read Butler. Not only does she claim it is difficult to figure out what Butler's ideas actually are, because of a mode of allusion which depends on assumed theoretical knowledge, but her writing is also dense and inarticulate. Instead of stating conclusions, Butler offers a list of questions and inconclusions. As Nussbaum argues, Butler's theory depends on a reader who is "subservient to the oracular voice of Butler's text, and dazzled by its patina of high-concept abstractness... [and thus] poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms" (¶12).

Gaiman offers a visual rejoinder to the issues in Butler's writing criticized by Nussbaum. Instead of a dense patina of verbiage, Gaiman offers terse, economical prose. As McCloud makes clear, comics offer two distinct but related types of discourse: words and pictures. On the one hand, words offer a linguistic mode of communication which can lead to a more abstract, but more nuanced, meaning. On the other hand, images give a pictorial representation of content which can explore a range of emotions not filtered through linguistic mechanisms. Yet, as McCloud states, "In comics at its *best*, words and pictures are like *partners* in a *dance*" (156). Gaiman's writing mixes with the art to provoke a reader's understanding of these difficult, abstract concepts. Instead of asking questions without answers, Gaiman offers images which answer questions not-yet-posed. Nussbaum's critique of Butler—that she does not provide a distinct method of subversion—is answered in *Sandman*. Gaiman shows how gender performances can be fluid and lend to mutual understanding, shaking long-established social hierarchies.

In a larger sense, the contrast between Gaiman and Butler is made clear through their respective representations of identity. Whereas Butler presents a view of human identity with nothing at its core, Gaiman uses a more tangible, affirming sense of self. In her call for an active, performative identity that challenges these established roles Goffman elucidates, Butler argues that there is no definite core sex/gender/identity: “The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which is the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show” (Butler 184). Thus, Butler’s center of identity is a void. We use our bodies to express our identities, but for Butler, our identities are always in flux. In fact, for Butler, our actions are our identities: identity is an external action rather than an internal attribute.

Gaiman presents an opposing conclusion to the idea that identity is an intangible action, showing that the center of the self is instead infinite. Stephen Rauch explores this idea when writing of *Sandman* as a modern myth. Using Barbie, a major character in *A Game of You*, as a mouthpiece to express the idea that everyone has hundreds of hidden depths within them, Gaiman argues that there are hidden depths within everybody, rebutting Butler’s body-as-signifying-lack:

Everybody has a secret world inside of them. I mean everybody. All of the people in the whole world -- no matter how dull and boring they are on the outside. Inside them they’ve all got unimaginable, magnificent, wonderful, stupid, amazing worlds ... Not just one world. Hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe. (qtd in Rauch 34).

Gaiman’s *Sandman* is a clear illustration of the same type of gender dynamics as Judith Butler presents with her gender theory. But whereas Butler argues that social norms further oppression

and urges a willful subversion of the gender roles that are definitive of our society (a constant doing rather than subservient wearing of gender), Gaiman empowers readers with the agency to construct their own identities rather than adhering to prescribed social norms. *Sandman* depicts both realistic and fantastic characters performing gender subversively as Butler indicates. But as Nussbaum points out, Butler seems defeated, convinced that patriarchal hegemony is too strong to bring down, and settles for subdued subversion of norms. Gaiman, however, seems to show subversion as a revolutionary act, the first step toward effacing the gender binary.

Gender is at the core of our identity from a very young age, when we first become aware of our own identities. As West and Zimmerman describe, extrapolating from the work of sociologist Spencer Cahill, children become involved in a “self-regulating process as they begin to monitor their own and others’ conduct with regard to its gender implications” (18). Children not only *act* a certain gender but also then *internalize* those actions as reality. For Butler and Gaiman alike, this core is viewed as an endless work-in-progress rather than a mandate. Both authors pay credence to the difficulty in renouncing the social constructs people have been operating in for lifetimes but urge an active subversion and retooling of identity performance nonetheless. Binary modes of thought are seen as restrictive and oppressive through this lens. The idea that a person cannot define himself or herself simply is liberating and, for Butler and Gaiman, an answer to ideological oppression. If everyone is complex and indefinable, there is little basis for social ranking and unjust hegemonies.

Using different media, Butler and Gaiman express aligning ideals. Butler, an academic writing for a scholarly community, uses language and examples that may be inaccessible for a mainstream audience. Gaiman’s serialized graphic storytelling in *Sandman* expands the reach of Butler’s themes, advancing her theory by providing relatable manifestations of gender

subversion to a larger, heterogeneous readership. Gaiman's work better serves the greater goal of gender-role deconstruction by appealing to the masses rather than to a privileged intelligentsia. By removing the educational barrier Butler writes behind, Gaiman seems to spread her message more effectively and in line with the idea of social equality.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Portions of this paper were presented at the 2011 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference in San Antonio.

ⁱⁱ Furthermore, Butler has been the recipient of the first prize in the Fourth Bad Writing Contest, held by *Philosophy and Literature*, for a sentence in the scholarly journal *Diacritics*: “*The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power*” (see http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm).