Odsjek za anglistiku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

DIPLOMSKI RAD

The Graphic, the Comic, the Postmodern, and the Fantastic: A Study on Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki smjer)

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Ak. godina: 2016. /2017.

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Introduction

Alan Moore's name has become a staple in comic book history. Almost every comic book fan will be familiar with his work, which includes famous titles such as *The Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *From Hell*, *Swamp Thing*, *The Killing Joke*, and *Promethea*. What makes Moore so interesting is that unlike other comic book authors, he is utterly devoted to maintaining an extraordinary amount of textuality and literary references within his works. All of his scripts are long, intricate, and detailed, and can span up to 1200 pages in length (Di Liddo 32). In one interview, Dave Gibbons, the artist for *The Watchmen* series, recalled receiving a 101-page manuscript from Moore, which covered only the first thirty-page issue (Stewart 97-103). As George Khoury claims, Moore is not a classical comic book artist since he refers to himself as being "primarily a writer," so it comes as no surprise that his work is so novelistic (*Extraordinary Works* 195). Some even consider Moore's comics to be novels in their own right. He does not illustrate his comics nor does he act as the primary artist in the creation of his comics; instead, he seeks out a visual co-creator to complement his writing. For years, he has teamed up with various artists of many different styles depending on the story he wishes to tell – from David Lloyd's atmospheric and cinematic approach to *V for Vendetta*, to Malinda Gebbie's emulation of the Belle Époque art styles in *Lost Girls*. Moore's passion for literature can be seen from his recent foray into writing prose, as his latest work is a million-word epic titled *Jerusalem* which took almost a decade to write.

He is not the only comic book writer to be in the spotlight for his literary endeavors. One of the reasons why there has been a resurgence of academic interest into the medium of comic art, especially complex comic books known as graphic novels, is its apparent connection to literature. Many great storytellers of the century have gained recognition for writing for comics and graphic novels, such as Will Eisner, Steve Ditko, Frank Miller, Jack Kirby, Art Spiegelman, and of course, Alan Moore. Although there are comics that can function without the aid of any kind of text, words are an integral part of the medium. Writing for comics means taking an idea and arranging it into images, as well as constructing the narrative into a sequence and creating the accompanying dialogue (Eisner 122). Moore himself purports that writing is an extremely important part of the creation of a comic book, as it is present right from the beginning of the process, taking part even before the actual act of comic book drawing (*Writing For Comics* 3). If a text is bad, then the "finished comic will

lack something that no amount of flashy coloring or printing can hope to compensate for" (Moore, *Writing For Comics* 3). It is no wonder, then, that comic books are often correlated with literature. However, although the medium can be compared to and has been influenced by literature, as well as film, painting, and other sister arts, many comic book artists, including Moore, prefer to view comic books as an independent art form in itself. Strangely enough, at the core of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* graphic novel series which this paper will be analyzing, Moore and O'Neill actually highlight the tangible intermediality of the comic book medium, as well as the hybrid nature of comic book formats and genres that can mix within a work of fiction and non-fiction. The most obvious ties that *The League* points to are literature and caricature, and the authors took their time to emphasize the role that these two media had in the creation of the graphic novel/comic book medium. There are two other facets of this comic book that underline the complexity of the text, and those are *The League's* inherent postmodern and fantastic aspect.

The inclusion of science fiction plays a great role in the story, as *The League* takes place in an alternate steampunk version of Victorian England, and Moore and O'Neill have gone to great lengths to depict the clash of nineteenth-century fiction with the historical setting of the text. The characters that populate this world are mostly taken from Gothic novels and colonial adventure novels written during that period, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* all the way to H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. The series has impressive amounts of intertextuality, pastiche, and parody. Anything, such as a peripheral character found within a panel or a simple poster hanging in the background, refers to some other text or some other work of art, which makes *The League* a model example of postmodern (graphic) writing. This comic book shows the ties between postmodernism and fantasy, ideas and reality, and high and low culture. It explores how literary and comic book formats are mutually intertwined and are actually imbued into the very nature of graphic media, which explains why *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is one of Alan Moore's most ambitious works.

This paper, therefore, will discuss how postmodernism (in literary and graphic sense) and the fantastic come together in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen.* Owing to the scale of the series, the paper shall focus on the first and second volumes, as well as on *The Black Dossier* which serves as a sourcebook for *The League*. In addition to exploring the meaning of a comic book, the paper will also point out the differences between a comic book and a graphic novel. The discussion will then focus on the dialogue between the postmodern and the fantastic to argue that the blend of the two enables the constitution of steampunk. Finally, it

will be used to demonstrate in what ways Moore and O'Neill utilize all of these elements to create the unique reading experience that is *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. This paper will show that *The League* is substantially and formally a postmodern work, which plays with and builds its narrative upon a whole array of hypotexts, and, simultaneously, critiques and examines the given material.

1. Comic Books and/or Graphic Novels

What is *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*? Some critics refer to the work as being a graphic novel; others, even Moore, have disregarded the term, and refer to it simply as a comic book. The *League* was printed in both forms, first in singular comic installments and then in its now familiar graphic novel form a few years later. What is more fascinating is that it was ascribed literary and artistic merit only after it was rebranded into a more "legitimate" book format. On 11 January 2010, the editors of *Time* magazine included *Watchmen* on their All-Time 100 Novels list, which toted other notable works such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *Watchmen* received recognition only after being remarketed as a graphic novel, while its first issues were published in single paperback comic book installments. This calls forth questions concerning the difference between comic books and graphic novels, and the alleged superiority of the latter.

There are contesting definitions of the art of comics. American cartoonist Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictoral and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). Other scholars have used additional terms such as "graphic narrative, graphic storytelling, the ninth art, and *bande desinée*" to try to fully encapsulate the essence of comics (Heer and Worcester xiii, emphasis in the original). There are two reasons as to why there is no universal name for the comic book medium. The first reason pertains to the ambiguity of the word "comic", as it can refer either to 1) a comic strip, i.e. a sequence of images that narrate a story; 2) a comic book, i.e. a publication that contains a series of comic strips; or 3) a comedian, i.e. a person who tells jokes for a living. The other reason relates to comics having a rather unsavory past, as the majority of cartoons were explicit and often of a scandalous nature. Moreover, comics were an undervalued medium because the public deemed it to be literature for "children and simpletons". Comic researcher and theorist Thierry Groensteen believes that the lack of historical legitimacy stems from four distinct roots: the first being that the medium is a hybrid of text and imagery, the second being its "storytelling ambitions" which some classified to be at the level of "sub-literature", the third being its ties with the inferior art of caricature, and lastly, its obvious ties to the period of childhood (Groensteen 7). Although comics have attained a level of legitimacy within the canon, some still believe that

comics are unable to "escape the cultural gutter" because they "tend to take the place of 'real books'" (Gardner 14). This is why they are used, for instance, in schools to "dumb-down" more complex works of literature such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (Groensteen 5).

The classification of the graphic novel has been an extremely arduous task because the line between comic books and graphic novels is relatively blurred. Theorists have had trouble determining whether the graphic novel is a whole new medium, a mode, a format or a genre; and the problem of classification stems from the imprecise language tied to each of these concepts. For instance, the word *format* was first used for books and print media to describe the context of their distribution and the type of product being distributed (Hescher 39). Afterwards the term was utilized in relation to marketing, journalism, TV and IT technology to denote different types of newspapers (broadsheets or tabloids), copyrighted forms for television programs, and ways in which computer data is encoded. When speaking of formats in the comic book medium, one is referring to the "quality of paper, hard cover, number of pages per volume (length), target group (adults), or number of runs," which also pertains to its marketing schemes and distribution (Hescher 39). While formats seem to be a clear-cut category, the word itself is often mixed up in popular culture with the word *genre*, which refers to the category/type of literature with a specific set of features, though here it means the "reception of media in a broader sense," that is, the "likes and dislikes for a certain type of media" (Hescher 39). In reality, genre designates "historical text groups" which are distinguished by certain attributes and idiosyncrasies, and can change depending on the context in which they are (Hescher 41). This makes it a flexible category, so works can be interpreted through different genres depending on the perspective from which it is analyzed. According to Achim Hescher, comic books and graphic novels are genres because they are forms that have developed through time, are marked by distinct conventions and rules, and have changed through history both in length and in kind (*Reading Graphic Novels* 41). Genres should not be confused with *modes*, the method or way something is written (i.e. a comic can be written through the satiric mode, the didactic mode, the narrative mode, etc.). This is also a point of contention as the word mode has been used either as a synonym or subtype of genre or format.

Furthermore, the use of the word genre is often confused with the word *medium,* although the two are completely different categories. In relation to comic books/graphic novels, "medium" is used to describe 1) "a plurimedial communication channel in which the

pictoral and the verbal influence the reception of the other or intertwine with respect to meaning production," 2) "an artistic multimodal discourse with its codes and rules," as well as 3) "a genre combining different *modes* of writing, usually the comic [...], the dramatic, and the epic or narrative mode" (Hescher 40, emphasis in the original). Comic books are therefore a medium because they operate as a vehicle that transfers information within a certain set of semiotic and linguistic codes. Graphic novels on the other hand are not a medium, as a medium is culturally distinct and is defined through a semiotic structure (or more of them) to communicate different types of information. The graphic novel does not utilize any new semiotic systems and is defined by the material and cultural constraints that are bound to the comic book medium. So, if one can categorize graphic novels and comic book as genres, how can we distinguish between the two? Firstly, it should be noted that there is an obsession with binary, explicit categories that stems from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – something is or is not part of a group, and there is no grey area to include works that are not so unambiguous in nature. Each category is composed of several attributes and if a work fails to fit all the attributes then it does not belong to that category. For instance, if we define graphic novels as genres that contain both pictoral and textual elements, then *The Arrival,* which does not contain a single word, cannot be a graphic novel, as classical categories do not entail genres that do not accord to common conventions or break the rules of a given genre.

What is needed, then, is a theory that will comprise the grey areas included within or created by overlapping two or more genres. Hescher proposes the prototype approach, which would allow for the existence of such categories (*Reading Graphic Novels* 3). Preconceived in Wittgenstein's theory of "family resemblances" and developed by Eleanor Rosch, prototypical categories allow for classification "based on 'both… and' as well as 'x rather than y' in addition to 'either/or' decisions" (Hescher 3). It is also a flexible system that allows for a level of vagueness within each concept and does not create new categories if new objects do not fit into old ones. In fact, the objects do not have to share all the attributes in a given category and there can be an "imperfect correlation between attributes" (Hescher 50). Each object is distinguished by the amount of resemblance to or the best example of a concept, so the inclusion of a concept within a prototypical group is just "a matter of gradience" (Taylor 58).

In order to visualize the level of exclusivity between each item, a category tree can be generated where the superordinate categories are positioned higher and the subordinate categories are positioned lower on the vertical axis. If there are more subordinate categories,

they are branched out on a horizontal axis. It is important to note that the categories on this axis are not of equal status to each other. They might share similar attributes, but they still differ in the quantity and quality of attributes, which is an inherently different feature than the classical Aristotelian model.

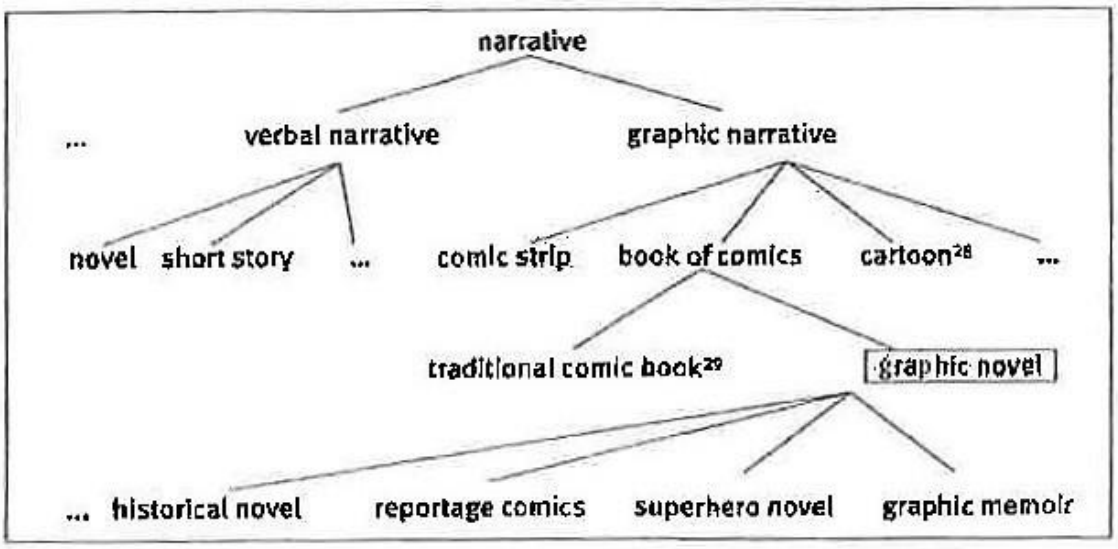

Fig. 1 (Hescher, Narrative category tree including graphic novels 47)

Each category in the tree is divided in subclasses that

> [… possess] the features of the immediately dominating category, plus one (or more) additional distinguishing features. Items on the same level of categorization all share the features of the immediately dominating category, but each is distinguished from the other categories on the same level by the presence of a unique feature (or set of features). (Taylor 2003: 49)

This means that a subordinate category has to have at least one distinguishing feature that is not contained within the core features of the superordinate category. By looking at the category tree that lays out the superordinate and subordinate classes of the word "narrative," one can see that the term branches out into verbal and graphic narratives (see Figure 1 above). The difference between graphic and verbal narratives is that graphic narratives rely heavily on images as well as text to communicate information, while verbal ones rely mostly on text to explicate an idea. The graphic novel is a subordinate category of books of comics, separated from comic strips and cartoons as well as segregated from a traditional comic book, making it a completely different and autonomous category.

What are then the basic elements that comprise a comic? Both McCloud and Eisner believe that comics use a "language" to communicate ideas, i.e. a particular set of visual and textual elements which are fused together to evoke a certain emotional and or aesthetic experience in the reader (McCloud 47; Eisner 44). The basic elements of a comic strip include panels, the gutters located between each panel, captions that detail an action(s) that is happening within the comic, and speech bubbles, i.e. word balloons (see Figure 2 below).

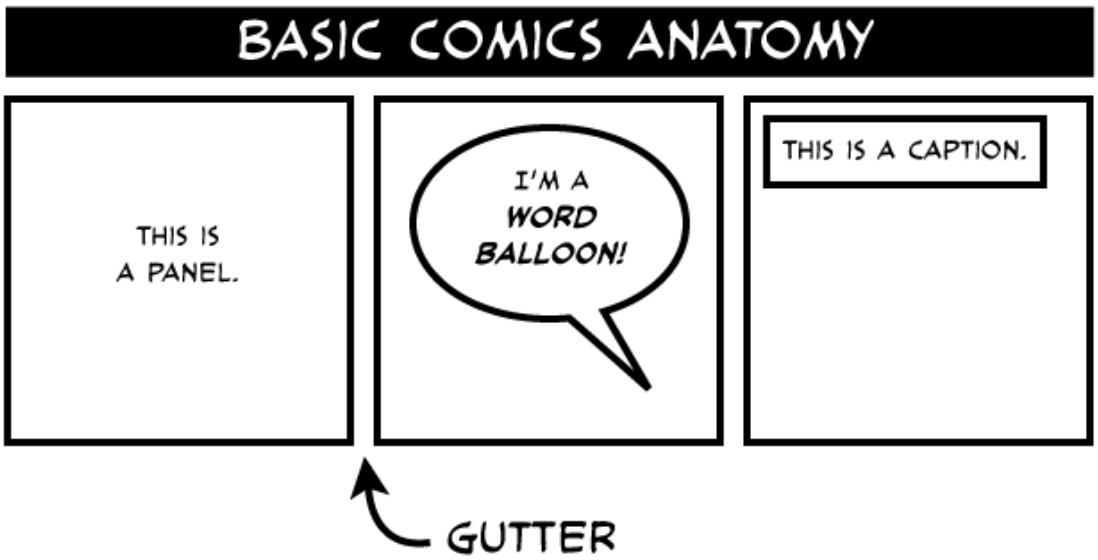

Fig. 2 (Dylan Meconis. Basic Comics Anatomy. 2012.
< http://www.dylanmeconis.com/how-not-to-write-comics-criticism/>)

To effectively convey a story or an idea, the comic artist (or artists) must break them up (either a story or an idea) into a series of narrative segments. These segments are referred to as comic panels or "frames". One could compare these sequenced segments to a storyboard that is usually drawn up before shooting a movie, but comic book panels do not directly coincide to film frames. Though cinema has influenced the art of comic books and there are many parallels that can be drawn between the two, the shape of a film frame is a result of its technology while comic book frames are not. The camera records images within a rectangular shape, so all the resulting shots will be projected in a quadrangular format. Comic book panels, on the other hand, are "part of the creative process" and artists use them to "capture or 'freeze' one segment in what is in reality an uninterrupted flow of action" (Eisner 38, 39). Their shapes are more the result of convention rather than a technological constraint. Some artists may do away with the rectangular panel shape, opting instead for borderless panels in order to

tell the story in a different or more effective way, but the panel is still there, and the readers can understand the comic because of this convention. Other conventions tied to the very act of reading comics, especially in Western culture, is the pervasive practice of reading comic books from left to right, front to back.

Another important convention that can be found on the page of a comic book, situated between two comic book panels, is a gap referred to as "the gutter". Both McCloud and Eisner believe that the gutter is the place where the reader's imagination steps in and makes creates closure between two panels (McCloud 73; Eisner 38). No matter how different the two images are, once they are grafted together there is some sort of "alchemy at work […] which can help us find meaning or resonance in even the most jarring of combinations" (McCloud 73). Therefore, to fully understand a comic strip, the reader must also participate in comprehending an image and has to use their imagination to bridge the "gutter" between two panels in order to construe the communicated idea (McCloud 66; Eisner 38). The brain creates the missing images and fills in the blanks as it stops for a brief millisecond between two panels. Naturally, there are other theories that counter this approach to reading comics. For instance, some theorists have asserted that the reader engages with the material not by focusing on the empty spaces between the frames, but on the content inside the panels and the ways the images interact with each other (Horstkotte 34). Neil Cohn criticizes McCloud's theory as well, stating that the gutter "does not provide any meaning – the content of the panels and their union does" ("Limits of time" 136). Closure cannot happen in the gutter, because that would imply that the reader cannot make an inference until they have reached the second panel. The gap is filled only when "it has already been passed over," which means that closure happens "at panels, not between them" (Cohn 135). When the reader is confronted with a string of images, it is not the blank space between them that helps with the reading process, but the images themselves and the way the artist composed and structured them together.

This very effect can be found in film as well. During the period between 1917 and 1924, Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov conducted several experiments that influenced the development of the Russian Avant-Garde, i.e. the Soviet Montage movement. Results of one of his experiments show that by splicing images of the impassive face of famous Soviet actor Ivan Mosjoukine with other images, such as a plate of soup or a woman reclining on a divan, viewers had different interpretations of the film, depending on which clips were grafted together (Kuleshov 192-195). When joined with the image of food, the viewers interpreted the

actor to be hungry, while the other example made them interpret his impassive face as being one of lust and wanting. This led Kuleshov to conclude that "apart from montage, nothing exists in cinema, that the work of the actor is absolutely irrelevant, that with good montage it is immaterial how he works" (Kuleshov 192). Soon after, however, he retracted this statement after conducting the same experiment with an amateur actor. The outcome this time showed that "it is not always possible to alter the semantic work of an actor" and that in fact what is being presented and the way something is depicted in the images plays a crucial part in the making of a film (Kuleshov 193). This finding can be translated to the comic book medium. It is not what is between two images that generates a visual idea, but the content of the images themselves; however, comic books lack motion and the sense of time that are intrinsically tied to the art of film, so to correlate one with the other would be highly inadequate.

2. Is There Such a Thing as a Graphic Novel?

The term graphic novel was introduced to distinguish comic books geared toward a more mature audience from the juvenile comic strips and comic books that had dominated the market for most of the medium's history. In the 1964 article of the Cappa-Alpha newsletter titled *The Future of "Comics"*, fan historian Richard Kyle suggested the term "graphic novel" because he felt the other two names (comic strips and comic books) were "inappropriate and antiquated" and were sure to "prevent the early acceptance of the medium by the literary world" (4). The origin of the graphic novel can be found in the underground comics of the 1960s and the 1970s which were politically radical, artistically innovative, as well as "extremely sexual, violent, and drug infused" (Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* 92; Hescher 9). The material was intended for a much more mature and adult audience than the traditional juvenile Marvel and DC comics. The works that influenced the evolution of the graphic novel genre are heavily immersed in the underground comic culture. Art Spiegelman's monumental graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* draws its roots from alternative comics, as well as Mark Miller's *The Dark Knight* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, both of which are regarded to be the cornerstones of the graphic novel genre. Though *Maus* is routinely cited as one of the greatest graphic novels ever written, it is only with the appearance of *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* that the term gained traction in comic book circles. Both works had immense impact on the whole comic book medium as they

"reoriented the industry's energies dramatically towards older readers" and the year of their publication marks the sudden and short-lived rise in popularity of comics also known as the "*first hype* of the graphic novel" (Hescher 15-16, emphasis in the original). These comic books are much more advanced in their visual design and in their story-telling techniques, and "feature a complexity" that was "unknown until then" (Hescher 16). The graphic novel did not take long to find an audience, as the readers who had grew up with comics during the 1950s and the 1970s easily switched to the more sophisticated and complex comic books.

During the period when graphic novels became a prevalent trend within the comic book scene, many artists exhibited mixed feelings and were even hostile to the use of this format. Alan Moore himself showed disdain towards the new term which he believed was a product of ongoing marketing schemes. He postulated that this tactic could be used by publishers to market an ordinary comic book as an expensive one and thereby make it more attractive for potential readers (Kavanagh). Presented as a unique item, the graphic novel could then cash in a greater profit than a run-of-the-mill comic book. And, in truth, it would be foolish to ignore the impact that the graphic novel had on the comic book market. In 2013, the sales of graphic novels within the U.S. had reached a staggering $870 million, and the number of comic book shops has been steadily growing over the last few decades thanks to the introduction of the graphic novel genre (Lubin). This is why many of theorists emphasize the role that fandom has in the production of graphic novels. Fans cash out regularly, not just to buy graphic novels, but to buy merchandise of the franchise as well as attend comic conventions and everything else tied to their favorite works. This creates a capitalist system that thrives on the interaction between the readers, the authors, and ultimately, the publishers, as well. Another criticism pertains to graphic novels having more prestige than the comic book format. The creator of *Maus* Art Spiegelman once quipped that graphic novels were "the latest wrinkle in the comic book revolution", created in "a bid for social acceptability" (*Comix* 81). From his perspective, companies could now stick the label "graphic novel" onto, as he calls them, "pedestrian comic books", works that are not worthy of any kind of artistic or literary merit, and thereby elevate them onto a more respectable level (*Comix* 81). This in turn could banish the whole medium "to the speciality shops" and could further devalue the medium, which at the time did not have a very enviable cultural status (*Comix* 81). Although these criticisms were made during the birth of the graphic novel genre, present-day critics regularly cite these statements as examples as to why the term graphic novel is a redundant

one. Some even argue that the term has been so watered down that they are calling for the abolishment of the word "graphic novel" altogether (see Yanes and Weiner 128; Weldon).

There have also been criticisms directed at the very formation of the word "graphic novel". For instance, the word "novel" contained within the term has made a few artists and theorists question the accuracy of the concept. One theorist expressed his uncertainty of the comic book-novel hybrid, stating that the "assimilation of comics to the novel is tempting, because it offers a way to domesticate a form which we are still struggling to understand adequately" (Sabin, *Adult Comics (New Accents)* 247). Adding the suffix "novel" is also a means to give the comic book medium legitimacy, because novels are something serious, prestigious, and are accepted as an obvious cultural standard, while the comic book genre is stigmatized and constantly faced with the problem of escaping the cultural gutter. Jan Baetens, who has done extensive theoretical work on the comic book genre, has also voiced his problems with the word "graphic", as it denotes hyperdiscriptivity in American English from which the graphic novel genre originates (qtd. in Di Liddo 17). This would mean that the emphasis is more on the literary, textual aspect of the story, and that the pictures which accompany it only serve as mere illustration, something secondary to the actual story structure. As stated before, comics are a sequential art, meaning that they utilize a sequence of images in order to tell a story or convey some sort of information. If there is a greater emphasis on the textual aspect of a comic, then the comic is no longer a comic, but a novel that has accompanying illustrations.

What ultimately matters is the story that an author wishes to convey. Translated into words (sans the imagery), a short comic strip might turn into an anecdote or a simple joke because of its "lack" of story complexity. On the other hand, since there is a big emphasis on the story in a graphic novel, narratologically speaking it can be analyzed as a novel, just as analyzing a film storyline can be likened to analyzing a work of prose, only further expanded to accommodate the form of the medium. Most of Moore's work, as well as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, are perfect examples of this uneven relationship where text dominates art, but there have been examples of graphic novels which contain pure imagery and are completely devoid of text. Martin Vaugh James' *The Cage*, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan or *The Number 73304-23-4153-6-96-8* by Thomas Ott are just some examples of graphic novels that utilize only pictoral elements to tell stories. As stated before, the story is an important facet in the creation of a graphic novel, and text and imagery are not working against, but *with* each other in order to create an interesting and coherent narrative.

In the past, critics have used five different criteria to categorize and define graphic novels. Those are length (pertaining to the number of pages contained in American comics as opposed to Franco-Belgian works), seriousness (referring to the theme and subject of the work), serialization (many graphic novels were first published as installments before being gathered and printed in book format), the type of illustrations (related to the "cartoonicity of the characters"), and complexity of the work (the "aspects of form and the subject matter") (Hescher 3). Length is cited as a category because the inclusion of more pages allows authors to develop longer and more complex narratives that focus on "building up tension, generating atmosphere, developing characters and so on," (Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* 165). However, this criterion has its pitfalls due to the fact that graphic novels such as *Watchmen* or *Maus* had around the same number of pages as a standard comic book when they were first published. It was only later that they were lengthened and compiled into book format. Similarly, serialization no longer seems to be a viable category for defining graphic novels, as most of today's works are publicized in book form. This includes works such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* or Frank Miller's *Holy Terror*, just to name a few.

Seriousness and authenticity are also tricky categories, as they are tied to the appearance of the autobiographical graphic novel/graphic memoir during the early 2000s. Since then, the presence of autobiographic elements has almost become a staple of the graphic novel genre. Works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Craig Thompson's *Blankets* are all examples of graphic novels that explore the histories of the authors' lives. Problems arise when the two criteria are used as a superordinate category for the graphic novel, as there are graphic novels that do not qualify as being serious, autobiographical, or "authentic" in nature. Moore's *From Hell*, *Watchmen*, and *The Killing Joke* are not autobiographical, but explore serious themes and motifs. Despite this, they are considered to be graphic novels. Similarly, Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons* is a combination of autofiction and (auto) biography, as it humorously narrates as well as fictionalizes the author's past. However, it does not fulfill the criteria of seriousness and authenticity. There seems to be a considerable number of works that do not fall under the category of autobiography, therefore it should be considered more as a mode of writing rather than a core feature of the graphic novel. The issue of cartoonicity is also heavily debated. Ed Tan proposes such a category, as he observes that drawings in comic books are "formulaic" and that the characters "look like personifications of the basic emotions" (*The Telling Face*

31). This leads to the illustrations having a "quality of childishness to characters" (*The Telling Face* 37-38). If a reader compares the illustrations in a Popeye comic to the illustrations in *V for Vendetta*, they will notice an obvious disparity between the two; however, this category is also not a viable one. There are graphic novels which are illustrated in a cartoony, exaggerated way, i.e. Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons* or Justin Green's *Binky Brown*, so cartoonicity should not be a reliable gauge of what is and what is not a graphic novel (see Figure 3 below).

Fig. 3 (Barry, *One Hundred Demons* 40)

Achim Hescher proposes the last aspect, complexity, as a key parameter to distinguish and grade graphic novels (*Reading Graphic Novels* 38). Complexity in a graphic novel entails that the narrative contains a "multi-layered plot and narration," "multifunctional use of colour," "complex text/image relation," "meaning-enhancing panel design/layout," "structural performativity," "multiplicity of references to texts/media," and "self-referential and metafictional devices" (Hescher 56). These attributes have been compiled into a category tree below to show how complexity can be approximately graded for any work to determine whether it is a comic book or a graphic novel.

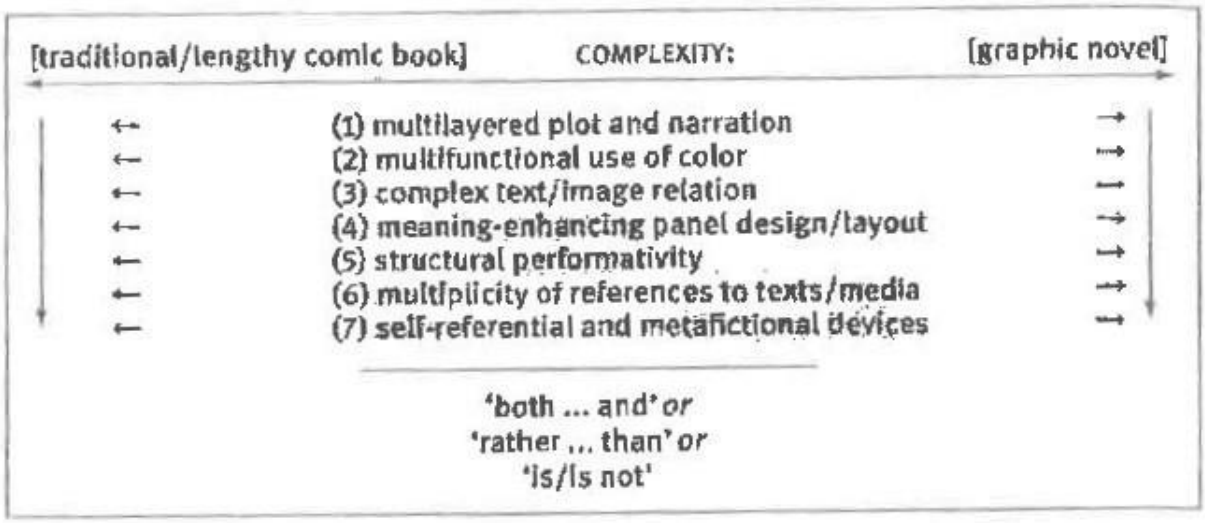

Fig. 4 (Hescher, Complexity gradient (specific) I 56)

In Figure 4, the seven attributes have been listed to distinguish traditional/lengthy comic books from graphic novels. During the grading process, a work can move from extreme left to extreme right on the horizontal axis, depending on the degree of complexity in each category, while the level of complexity is determined from the number of points accumulated on the vertical axis, i.e. from top to bottom. The higher the score, the higher the complexity of a comic book and the higher the likelihood that the work is a graphic novel. A comic book does not have to score high in all categories to be called a graphic novel. For instance, *Maus* scores high in all categories except in the colour complexity because the artwork is done entirely in black and white.

The multi-layered plot and narration category refers to the "multiplicity of character psychology, points of view and layered voices" (Hescher 57). This polysemic nature of graphic novels stems from the tendency of authors to explore and expand on the psychological makeup of the main and side characters, more so than in a normal comic book. The use of color is also important in graphic novels, as it gives artists the chance to show certain ideas or information that cannot be expressed through text, from character's moods and personalities, to changing physical realities (Hescher 64-66). Graphic novels are also known to have a complex relation between images and its accompanying text. This is tied to the use of visual montage techniques and the amount of text-image combinations, as well as the way that panels and/or frames are designed on each page. According to Elizabeth Rosen, comic book panels express "mood, indicate character, signal movement and reveal theme," as well as "reinforce the emotional state of its narrator" (*Narrative Intersection* 59). Graphic novel artists often experiment with the layout of the panels/frames and strive to break away from the

usual conventions of the comic book media in order to communicate certain ideas that would not be translatable in a normal comic book.

There is also a increased use of metalepsis and metareferences within graphic novels. Authors often reveal their presence within the text and the ontological confines of the comic (i.e. the boundary between the panels and the gutters, as well as the boundary between the margins of a comic book and reality) are repeatedly violated. The unobtrusive elements that constitute the skeleton of the comic purposefully attract the reader's gaze and highlight the very conventions of graphic representation. Lastly, graphic novels are highly intertextual and metafictional. There are numerous references to other media, other texts, and the text repeatedly draws attention to its inherent fictionality. This meta-commentary is usually expressed through the narrative or a character within the narrative by making remarks on the textual and visual components of the graphic novel, the comic book medium, or the "issues relating to the graphic novel (or its making) we are reading" (Hescher 81).

If the complexity gradient is applied to *The League of Extraodinary Gentlemen*, the results will show that it is not a traditional graphic novel, though it does score high in plot and narratorial intricacy, as well as in its level of intertextuality. The plot spans centuries, featuring both familiar and unfamiliar canonical stories and characters within *The League's* storyline. The imposing narrative allows for a myriad of references to be made within the text, which Moore has described as being a "complex literary joke that is probably about a lot of books that [the comic readers] haven't read and would never be interested in reading" (Nevins, *Blazing* 259). *The New Traveler's Almanac* alone, which is appended to the main story of the second volume, is described as being a "virtuoso display of intertextuality that would shame any modernist or postmodernist writer, a grandiose attempt to create a storyworld that contains all other storyworlds" (Thoss). Furthermore, the number of narrators in the main storyline is threefold; fourfold if one includes the *Allan and the Sundered Veil* short story. The text features a primary narrator, Scotty Smiles; a secondary narrator, located in Mina Murray's letters, notes, and diary entries; and a third over-arching narrator represented by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, the two authors behind *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. When it comes to the other categories, though, the first two volumes of *The League* lag behind other notable graphic novels, such as *The Watchmen* or *Maus*. The use of color is subdued and the text-image relation/panneling is laid out in a traditional fashion so as to emulate Victorian chapbooks and penny dreadfuls. The structure of the storyline is mostly straight-forward and linear, though the accompanying short stories

detail previous and subsequent events concerning Allan Quatermain and Mina Murray. Furthermore, character development is not a focal point due to the brevity of the first two books. In fact, Hescher likens *The League* to being a "lengthy or enhanced comic book" rather than a conventional graphic novel, which makes perfect sense considering one of the primary intents of the authors is to connect the comic tradition with Victorian print media and literature (Hescher 56). This only pertains to the first two volumes of *The League*, as Hescher notes that the complexity of *The Black Dossier* (2000) categorizes it as being a graphic novel (Hescher 56).

3. What Constitutes Postmodern (Graphic) Fiction?

When reading essays and texts on *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the words that are routinely used to describe the comic is "postmodern", "Neo-Victorian", "steampunk", and "intertextual". *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* uses *The League* as a prime example of postmodern historical novels that fall under the category of steampunk and retro-futurism (McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* 127). *The Guardian* has called it "a masterpiece of SF art" and a "fantastical sci-fi reinvention of Victoriana" (Jones), while others have categorized it under the guise of "historiographic metafiction" and Neo-Victorian fiction (Thoss). So, what is it that makes any work, *The League* included, postmodern? Linda Hutcheon states that postmodernism is a "contradictory enterprise: its art forms ... use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention [... in] their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past" (*A Poetics* 23). The key aspect in her definition is the amplification of the ironic, the incongruous, as well as the cynical and often disparaging approach to both reality and fiction, where facts are an illusionary term and there are only interpretations of the "truth". Postmodern irony assumes that everything is inherently subjective and that there are no eternal truths, which calls into question "our entire concept of both historical and literary knowledge, as well as our awareness of our ideological implication in our dominant culture" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* x). Similarly, Brian McHale asserts that postmodernism "does not exist precisely in the way that 'the Renaissance' or 'romanticism' do not exist," meaning that there is no definitive definition of the term (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 4). In fact, the very term is confusing as it is a compound word that contains both the present in the word "modern", and the future in the prefix "post-". The postmodern author is faced with the problem of writing "fiction that has not yet been written"

(McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 4). McHale grants that postmodernism stems from the desire to move away from the modernist movement of the twentieth century, and though postmodernism wants to break ties with the earlier movement; it is just a more complex continuation of it.

Postmodernist literature "produces new insights, new or richer connections, coherence of a different degree kind, ultimately more discourse" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 4-5). In order to identify and demarcate postmodernist literature from modernist texts, one has to use the "dominant" which McHale calls the "focusing component of a work of art" that "guarantees the integrity of the structure" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 5). Depending on the approach that a reader takes to analyzing a text, the text will generate those specific dominants. This means that a feminist reader will naturally find feminist dominants while a Marxist reader will find Marxist ones. When categorizing a text, the two most important dominants are the epistemological and the ontological dominants. The epistemological dominant is tied to modernist fiction and questions a character's knowledge, as well as the knowledge of the world in which he is situated. The best example of a modernist work is the detective novel – it focuses on "the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the 'same' knowledge by different minds, and the problem of 'unknowability' or the limits of knowledge" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 9). The ontological dominant, on the other hand, is a postmodernist dominant represented by the science fiction genre. These texts examine the nature of existence and being, as well as the creation and disintegration of metaphysical foundations within a medium.

For Hutcheon, writing that best represents postmodernism is "historiographic metafiction", fiction that is "at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past", as well as offering "a sense of the presence of the past, […] a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces be they literary or historical" (Hutcheon, *Historiographic Metafiction* 3, 4). It is a genre that uses "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" so as to make "the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (*A Poetics* 5). Metafictional narratives strive to "problematize narrative representation," and often self-reflexively explore the various facets of genres, mediums, and forms in order to destabilize the preconceived notions of what actually constitutes literature (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 40). It highlights the fact that all arts are composite arts; that is, not one medium has retained its purity and that each medium is inadvertently influenced by some other medium (and vice versa). Painting influences

literature, literature influences music, music influences theatre, and the same goes for other media. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, "*all* mediation is remediation", i.e. all media assimilate and incorporate other media within themselves, no matter how pure or "primary" that art is (55). No medium can escape the web of other media, nor can it function as "its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (Bolter and Grusin 55). The very elements that appear in postmodern literature can be found in the postmodern narratives of graphic novels/comic books, as well.

The appearance of graphic novels on the comic book market marks the advent of change and demand for postmodern comics, comics that tackled both fiction and non-fiction, from novels to memoirs, all the way to graphic essays, such as McCloud's *Understanding Comics.* It also corresponds with the postmodern shift of blending high art with popular culture. Considering its "history of avant-garde and underground transgression as well as of capitalist co-option", graphic novels can be regarded as a format that truly blossomed during the postmodern era (Hutcheon, "Postmodern Provocation" 302). Hutcheon states that the rising popularity of the graphic novel during the 1990s was "part of the postmodern interest in the semiotic interaction of the visual and the verbal" (*The Glories of Hindsight* 45). While reading a comic book, the reader's senses are bombarded by text in the form of dialogues and/or author's notes or captions. Concerning the visual aspect of a comic, the reader has the option to fixate their gaze on the background or the foreground of the illustration, either on the details or the picture as a whole. When faced with a panel, the eyes have to focus either on the text or the image, as the graphic novel "foregrounds the complex processes of interpretation and selection that are part of the reading experience" (Hutcheon, "The Glories of Hindsight" 46). Robert Petersen stresses that while perusing a comic book page

> the eye must move back and forth, up and down to sort through the conflicting streams of information to assemble the visual verbal code. The combination of visual and written clues accentuates the sound experience by requiring the reader to slow down to get the full effect. Thus, comics are ideally read at the speed of sound, whereas books are read at the speed of sight (Petersen 164).

In a wholly postmodern turn, the act of reading a comic book becomes a non-linear, slowed down process, much different from reading a text in a conventional novel. Comic readers have to take in all of the information by sweeping their gaze across the whole page, left and right, as well as in an up and down motion, and so have a greater creative freedom in

the interpretation of a text. Likewise, the artist has the ability to frame reality through a panel and can actively choose to use a certain style that speaks of the reality that it is representing, i.e. the story itself, which is exactly what postmodern fiction strives to do as well. Postmodern fiction shows how we create "versions of reality" through various discourses, and this very topic is "foregrounded in the postmodernist novel" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 40). By utilizing a darker style, a comic book can highlight a bleak and depressing atmosphere, or emphasize the subtleties of the interactions between the characters and the emotional intensity of the scenes by choosing a more toned-down, realistic representation of the world. The use of decompressed stories has also made an impact on the narratorial, postmodern style of modern graphic novels, which has been appropriated from Japanese manga artists. Here, the story is told by using "extended, realistically-paced dialogue scenes; long, cinematic action sequences; slow build-ups to establish a protagonist's origins and motivations" (Stuart Moore, "A Thousand Flowers"). The author(s) can then transcend the concept of time and space by drawing out the action through multiple panels, or by superimposing one image and turning it into a splash panel to create an atmosphere.

4. The Fantastic and Postmodern Hybrid

The next concept that is closely tied to *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is steampunk, which is situated in the realm of the fantastic as it is a subgenre of science fiction. Just like the postmodern, the fantastic is a highly debated concept within the literary community. The first theorist to offer a more structural discussion of the genre is Tzvetan Todorov, who describes the fantastic as a genre that takes place in our world, but the event is "unworldly" and the "person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions, either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination […] or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality" (Todorov 25). If the event turns out to be a figment of the protagonist's imagination, then the story falls under the category of the uncanny; on the other hand, if the event is ingrained into the fabric of reality, then the work falls under the category of the marvelous. The fantastic, however, lies between the two, when "a person who knows only the laws of nature confront[s] an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25). If a text manages to hesitate between the marvelous and the uncanny without slipping into either one, then it can be categorized as

literature of the pure fantastic. This hesitation is not just on the part of the protagonist of the text, but the reader as well. Todorov even puts the emphasis on the moment of the reader's hesitation between possible and impossible explanations, so the reader becomes the key element to defining the fantastic. So, one can come across texts where the protagonist(s) does not experience this ambiguity, while the reader is left in the dust as to whether the events that unfolded were supernatural or not. The opposite is also true, where the character experiences hesitation and is forced to choose between two interpretations. In this instance, the reader is integrated into the narrative, which is "defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated" (Todorov 31). There is no actual reader in the text, but an implicit one, whose perception is supplied "with the same precision as the movements of the characters" (Todorov 31).

Another important theorist of the fantastic is Rosemary Jackson, who discusses it not as a genre, but a mode of writing. For Jackson, the fantastic is the locus where one can trace "a culture's limits of its epistemological and ontological frame" (*Fantasy* 23). Fantastic literature opens up gaps and fissures within the real, and creates an unstable narrative that thrives on producing a dialogue between fact and fiction. The dialogic nature of fantastic literature is something inherently imbued into the fantastic mode, as the text is constantly trying to interrogate and interact with the real (Jackson 36). The reader's perception is left in a dizzying state as they cannot choose whether the narrative is un-true and un-real, therefore sending the truth of the matter into a spiraling "vanishing point" (Jackson 38). The fantastic challenges the traditional epistemological systems of knowing, and Jackson points out that many of these texts are preoccupied with vision, especially with the phenomenon of "paraxis". Paraxis entails the place where "object and image seem to collide," but in fact nothing resides in this particular area, it is all an optical illusion (Jackson 19).

Christine Brooke-Rose asserts that in fantastic literature, empirical reality is no longer a stable concept as it once was, and so everything that is "'real' has come to seem unreal", therefore it is "natural to turn to the 'unreal' as real" (Brooke-Rose 4). Humans have become extremely aware of the changes that follow each systemic collapse within historical or empirical epochs and the subsequent gaps are then filled in with new "carefully planned ideological discourse" (Brooke-Rose 10). This experience of a reality "brutally endowed with significance and then brutally deprived of it" actually fosters the perception of the real having become the unreal (Brooke-Rose 10). Both postmodernism and the fantastic waver on the brink of uncertainty and ambiguity. Both kinds of texts elicit numerous possible

interpretations, and for Brooke-Rose, any ambiguous text that experiments with the divide between the real and the unreal, as so many postmodern works do, can be perceived as being fantastic as well.

Similarly, Gerhard Hoffman points out that the fantastic is inherently chaotic, abstract, and strives to discover and fill in the void/the gap in a text. Through chaos it serves to showcase the incongruities that deviate either from pre-existing systems or from the real world, and, in turn, fights against the binds of tradition and convention, bringing out an inherent "indeterminacy, even non-signification, a disjunction of the stable relation between word and meaning" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 246). Likewise, the turn towards abstraction is a by-product of its chaotic makeup, as it functions as a negation of the real, as well as empties the "'normal', 'plausible', 'recognizable' hierarchies, relationships, sequences, and 'fillings'" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 249). The process of abstraction can be applied to space, time, movement, events, and character, and can be found in the processes of meta-reflection and self-interrogation as well (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 254). By emptying content from its pre-existing foundations, the text is liberated and the reader's imagination can run wild. Chaos and abstraction are two important keywords in defining the fantastic, as "both are manifestations of negation, negation of the commonsensical real" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 225). The fantastic also battles against the nothingness that is "really real" – it reshapes it and hides the void, exchanging it instead with "the fictional actuality of 'something' imaginary and fantastic" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 258). All of these categories are contained within postmodern "irrealism".

Hoffman emphasizes that there is an increased use of the term "fantastic" when analyzing postmodern fiction, which is based on

> … [(1)] the dominance of an "irrealistic" quality in postmodern narrative, (2) upon the necessity of conceptualizing this "irrealism" in relation to what might be called the fictionally "real" or, rather, the ideas of the real and the probable that function as horizon to the discourse of the fantastic, and (3) upon the fact that the category of the fantastic is employed for the epistemology and ontology of postmodern fiction by the authors themselves. (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 225)

Both the fantastic and postmodern texts strive to synthesize disparate elements, deconstruct and reconstruct the pre-existing, opposing elements in order to create something

new. This sort of dynamic, which entails synthesizing both the possible and the impossible, creates a "'dramatic' potential of contrasting figurations, border crossings, and liminal disruptions," all of which are salient characteristics of postmodern works (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 246). It is important to stress that the irrealistic quality of postmodern fiction does not come just from the use of the fantastic, but from the use of metafictional "'open'-systems" which integrate "illusion with anti-illusion" within a text to "interrupt and fragment the story" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 103). Postmodern fiction is not interested in the modernist tendencies of searching for epistemological answers as to what the "truth of knowledge" really is, but turns to ontological problems and is preoccupied with "being and the existence of autonomous worlds" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 18). These autonomous worlds go through the process of defamiliarization, and by constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the situational matrix of a fictional postmodern world, the text focuses on the "liberation of the mind" and "correct[s] the schema of mere functioning and cliched living, a humanizing perspective" (Hoffmann, "The Fantastic in Fiction" 364). The postmodern fantastic can be identified through three main hallmarks, based

> (1) upon the dominance of an "irrealistic" quality in postmodern narrative, (2) upon the necessity of conceptualizing this "irrealism" in relation to what might be called the fictionally "real" or, rather, the ideas of the real and the probable that function as horizon to the discourse of the fantastic, and (3) upon the fact that the category of the fantastic is employed for the epistemology and ontology of postmodern fiction by the authors themselves. (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 225).

Rosemary Jackson has also pointed out that the fantastic resembles the postmodern condition of the destabilization of the connection between the signifier and the signified, as postmodernism resides on the concept of "unlimited semiosis" in which the interpretation of a sign is not just hiding a simple meaning, but a sign (*Fantasy* 40; Eco 3). Brian McHale points out that "postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genres of the fantastic" and that it draws upon fantastic themes, motifs, and literary conventions (*Postmodernist Fiction* 74). Also, in both fantastic and postmodernist literature, the barriers between reality and the supernatural are broken down, so that "the entities can migrate across the semi permeable membrane that divides" these two worlds (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 35). Frederic Jameson also identified the rise of postmodern "fantastic historiography", a genre of fiction that comes up with "new multiple or alternate strings of events" with which authors can

parody, censure, and imagine a new, better world, a world that is utopian in its conception (Jameson 369). Faced with the impotence of changing the historical record, authors have turned to the realm of imagination, creating "wild imaginary genealogies and novels that shuffle historical figures and names like so many cards from a finite deck" (Jameson 367). Postmodern fantastic histeriography aims to participate in the re-creation of fictional and non-fictional realities by utilizing two types of fabulations. The first one termed "mythomania" focuses on mixing up ontologies in order to mime the epic styles, presenting their history "better than any of the 'facts' themselves" (Jameson 368). It has the appearance of a historiography and retains the histeriographic genre, but the content within these works is made up, it only mimics a historic chronicle. Unlike the first type of fantastic historiography, the second one strives to produce fictions where "imaginary people and events" are mixed with " real-life ones [who] unexpectedly appear and disappear" throughout the unfolding narrative (Jameson 369). Here historical knowledge and imagination tread on unstable ground and are compounded into one structure where the reader can easily fall into believing facts to be fiction and vice versa. These types of narratives work to regain their power and independence by utilizing the power of fantasy and imagination from the pervasive ideologies that have imposed their version of history.

Both of Jameson's types of fantastic histeriographies can be found in the steampunk genre. In this type of fiction, the narrative pays great attention to historical detail, compounded with a penchant for Victorian settings and incorporation of devices and technological wonders that have not existed during that time, but still have the feel of the era. According to David Beard, steampunk is influenced by three "root systems," as he calls them, the first being the fantastic illustrations and narratives created during the nineteenth century which reflected the changing cultural and social strata in Victorian England ("A Rhetoric of Steam" xvi). The second influence comes from "key science fiction works of the mid- and late twentieth century," which includes works by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells (Beard xvi). And finally, steampunk draws on the DIY culture of the punk and post-punk generations, celebrating the archetypes of the inventor and self-sufficient tinkerer that are outside of the radius of the "big, mind-deadening companies who want to package and sell shrink-wrapped cultural product" (Sterling 32). Both steampunk and cyberpunk alike, two genres that appear at the same time, are to their core both counter-institutional and countercultural. The "punk" part in both movements communicates the desire for production to move away from capitalist

and corporative mindsets that have dominated the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Steampunk is ultimately an attempt by modern creators to renew the past that never existed.

The League is a work that is full of allohistorical settings, which John M. McKenzie defines as "the history that could have been, but by happenstance was not" (Clockwork Counterfactuals 135). Steampunk is inherently allohistorical, as it explores an alternate history where the "internal combustion engine had never been invented" (McKenzie 135). It mostly focuses on exploring the airtight relationship between technology and capitalism, as this very relationship emerged during the Industrial Revolution, as well as reflecting the surging trend of "Environmentalism and Cold War nuclear panic" (McKenzie 138). *The League* takes on these particular themes by placing the search for the missing Cavorite, an antigravity metal which first made its appearance in H. G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*, as the inciting incident which brings the main characters together. When it is discovered that the Cavorite has been stolen, the very first fear is that "some rival nation… say, for instance, Germany… might soon be capable of subjecting England to an aerial bombardment with explosives" (Moore, *The League I* 55). The battle between the Empire and its "enemies" is always fuelled by the fear that the technology might fall into the "wrong" hands, which would result in the demise of the British super-power. In the second installment of *The League*, this fear is brought to a new level as we witness the invasion of the Earth, Great Britain, to be precise, by alien forces, which wield technology far greater and more powerful than anything existing in these Victorian times. The way the conflict is dissolved is also by utilizing technology, which consists of dropping a bomb containing a hybrid of anthrax and streptococcus on the alien forces.

There is a whole array of works that have taken inspiration from the steampunk subculture, which include "literature, graphic novels, music, politics, art, design, cultural theory, material culture" as well as other creations that have popped up online in recent years (Guffey 257). Authors have the opportunity to use popular fictional and/or historical events and characters to both critique and re-create the past. Most steampunk works find their inspiration within the period of the Industrial Revolution, especially during the mid-nineteenth century, and utilized steam to power boats, road vehicles, railways, and other such inventions. It focuses on "the attitudes toward the past," as well as on the "alternatives to a present-day status quo to which it is violently opposed", making it a genre that is constantly interacting with the past and the now (Pike 265). Magic and science are amalgamated into one force in order to produce a new kind of technology, thus populating a "cityscape rife with

‘infernal machines’ and passages to other worlds” (Pike 265). The technology is more personable and organic as it is “meant to be humanized and made ‘knowable’” (Guffey 260). There is no sense of despair, detachment or intrusive alteration of the human body that is distinctive of cyberpunk. Steampunk machinery is presented with a certain dose of “honesty”, as it markedly rejects the cold, polished, and soulless feel of modern technology. The authors appreciate a certain rough aesthetic to the steampunk worlds and nurture “a patched together appearance” which they deem to be “more honest than prefabricated pseudo perfection” (Bix 242). In the center of most steampunk literature is the Victorian period; though, as much as the narrative is intertwined with Victoriana, by including technology that is inherently fantastic it is distanced from it as well.

In *The League* there is a profusion of technological wonders that range from flying steam-powered zeppelins, giant machine guns and towering cranes, to monumental examples of architecture that could not be humanly possible to build without the aid of steam-powered tools (see Figure 4). Instead of digging the English Channel which exists in the empirical world, the alternative Empire is constructing a huge bridge that would span the North Sea all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. The golden plaque tacked on one of the pillars reads that the project will be completed at a later date due to “technical difficulties,” which denotes the ruinous, wear-and-tear state of the British Empire, but also provides the technology with a familiar organic feel. There are also traces of steampunk outside the main text, surrounding it and further deepening the lore of *The League*’s world. The graphic novel is littered with advertisements selling all sorts of fantastic contraptions, such as the Veloci Midden invented by the Fergus of Fergus, a “Commode/Runabout, ingeniously self-powered by a methane burning engine,” or Dr. Barnstable Herzegovina Barnstable’s Electrical Cardio-Turbine which sends electrical currents to the “delinquent organ” of patients with heart failure (Moore, *The League I* 187, 189). The names of these inventions sound imposing; however, Barnstable’s invention caused several elderly patients to suffer “fatal electrocution as a result of poorly-attached catheters,” while the Veloci Midden caused accidents that were “both horrific and socially distressing,” forcing Fergus to go into permanent hiding as a woman (Moore, *The League I* 187, 189). The destruction or inefficiency that often comes with the use of steampunk creations denotes that this technology and this universe, though awe-inspiring, are also prone to rust, decay, and faultiness. In short, steampunk is nothing special in this world, even though it seems that way. The effect of proximity and familiarity are even more intense by grounding the world of fantasy in a scientifically explicable universe. Things do not

magically happen in the empirical world, but can be explained through science. The same applies to the events and gadgets in *The League*.

Through various facets, the steampunk genre also exposes the social status-quo and often works on problems dealing with gender, race, and technology. By projecting far into the past and creating a utopian setting, authors and creators strive to right the past's wrongs. Steampunk works try and reinvent technology more as something that "sustains, rather than destroys our environment and our relationships" (Beard xxiv). It also often tries to take on gender problems by making the protagonist a woman, but in a bid for staying true to history, the stories unintentionally incorporate the same stereotypes that the authors are trying to combat. Race relations are also often brought up in stories, as the Victorians were great colonialists, and the question of race is inexorably tied to Victorian England. However, instead of actually redeeming and changing the course of history to incorporate a more acceptable treatment of race relations in Victorian times, the presence of racially diverse characters "is often theoretical, and not a merry reality that the average steampunk has to deal with," making the portrayed races and minorities "dependent upon reductive media stereotypes" (Goh 16; Beard xxiv).

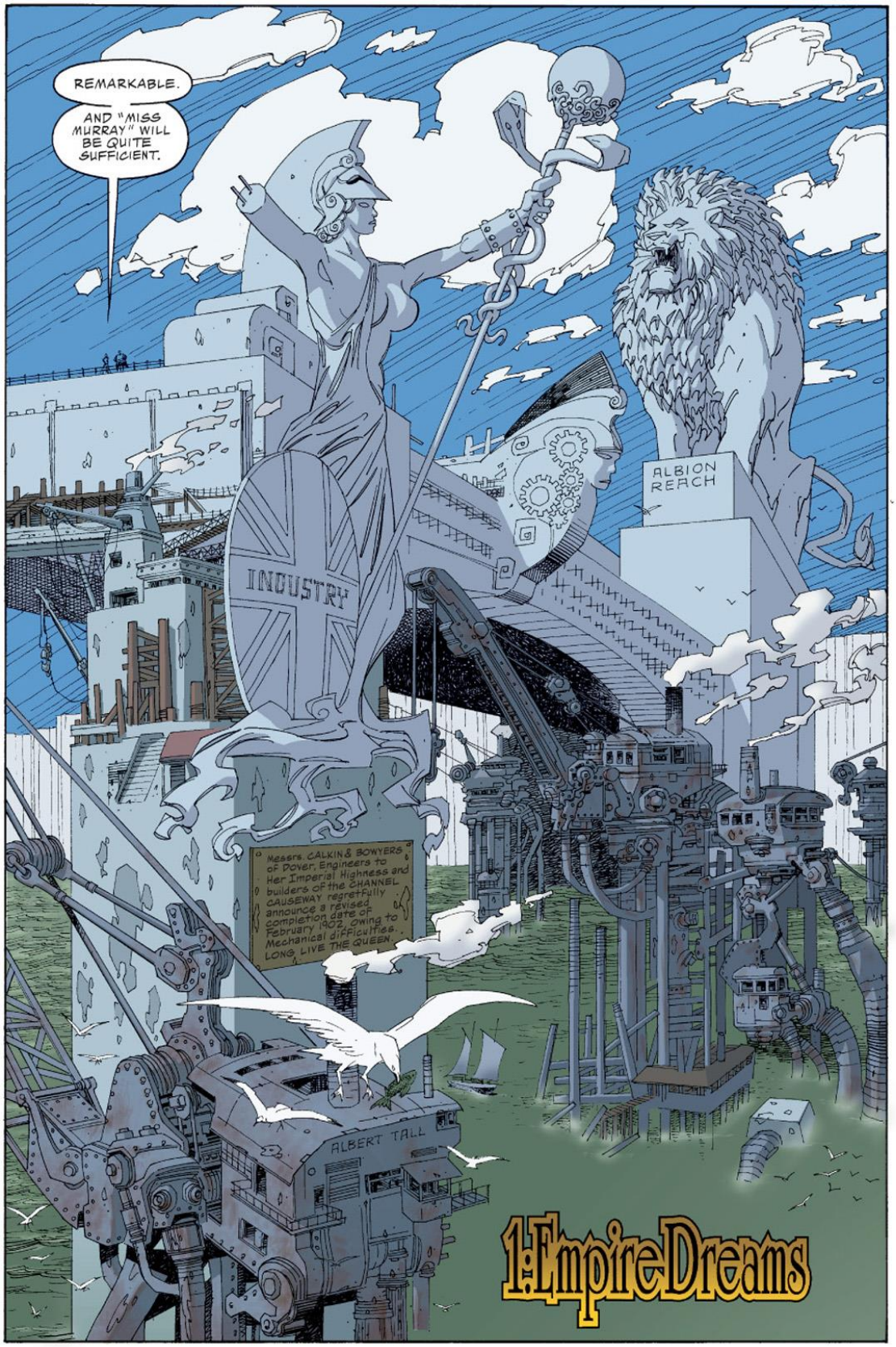

Fig. 4 (Moore, *League I* 10)

In *The League*, one of the main characters is an Indian prince, and Moore and O'Neill painstakingly tried to incorporate as many oriental motifs within his design: from his physical appearance to his mannerisms and his ship. There are allusions to his ethnicity and his heritage, as can be seen in the episode where Mina Murray, Quatermain, and Nemo have to sneak into Rosa Coote's Correctional Academy. Here Nemo has to take on the role of the manservant, "like some low-caste punkah-wallah" as he states begrudgingly (Moore, *The League I* 46/3). Also, the language that is used in reference to him also points out the inherent racism of Victorian society (Hyde at one point refers to him as being a "darky"). Though Moore and O'Neill try to empower Nemo's character by bringing him back to his real roots, they also fall in the trap of creating a racist stereotype - a mystic, a warrior prince, fuelled by his rage against the British Empire and hell-bent on getting his revenge for all the injustices done against his people. Furthermore, steampunk is also an inherently retrosexual movement (Stock 4). As much as most of the protagonists of recent works of steampunk are female, the age they are being placed in is rigidly patriarchal, as it was "a time when gender differentiation was clearer" (Stock 4). The way women are portrayed in the comic is also susceptible to over-sexualization and Victorian concepts of femininity. Mina Murray, although the leader of the group, is constantly undermined by her colleagues with comments that concern her femaleness. Her marital status is scrutinized, as being divorced is something that is looked down upon, and she is ostracized because she was "ravished by a foreigner," though it is pointed out that it was "quite against [her] will, […] but then people do talk so, don't they?" (Moore, *The League I* 8/3).

5. Fantastic Postmodern Characters

As noted by Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, the medium of traditional classical literature is now "a recurrent and important subject matter in the graphic novels themselves" and no other author exploits these ties between comics and literature than Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill (*The Graphic Novel* 211).This sort of process of constant intertwinement of science fiction, history, fiction, and pop culture allows Moore and O'Neill to be admitted into the literary world, as well as provide ample evidence of "the sharp and significant lines that exist between late nineteenth-century popular fiction and the later world of comics, American superheroes, and the graphic novel" (Baetens and Frey 212). *The League* is such a deeply intertextual work, that handbooks have been created, such as Jess Nevins' *Heroes and*

Monsters, that note all of the allusions and references that can be found on each page. When asked about the lack of footnotes and explanations in *From Hell*, Moore answered that incorporating notes with the text "would be like explaining the joke" and "would to some degree spoil the experience" (Moore, "Alan Moore").

Although *The League* series is packed with pastiche, Moore states that he always tries to make the narrative the focal point of the text so that the readers do not have to get all the subtle nods and winks in order to comprehend the story; however, getting all of the references will result in the reader "having a richer experience" (Moore, "Alan Moore"). In fact, by using the format of the graphic novel, Moore and O'Neill have the ability to tell a wide-encompassing story that can "handle the detail and scope of material without becoming destroyed by its own weight" (Baetens and Frey 212). *The League* has many works that are directly tied to it, and this is most visible in the main protagonists of the comic book, as Moore has encapsulated almost all of the postmodern indicators discussed earlier within them. Each and every character is imbued with an astonishing amount of historic detail, as well as high- and low-brow culture, and the final result is an amalgamation of parody, criticism, and even genuine reverence for the Victorian era. What makes *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* such a deeply postmodern and intertextual work is the fact that all of the characters of *The League* are part of the public consciousness, some even elevated to the status of a symbol or an icon. Moore often revisits the field of canonical literature and tries to incorporate it within his work. However, during his work on *Lost Girls*, a graphic novel that depicts sexually explicit adventures of several female characters plucked out of public domain books, Moore came to the idea that a similar premise could work if it were translated into Victorian Britain. He often refers to *The League* as an "almost bastard stepchild of *Lost Girls"* and in one interview he stated that the undertaking stemmed from "realizing the richness of the literary landscape we're surrounded by and that it's all laying there for the taking" (Moore, "Alan Moore"). These old ideas and characters had to be reinterpreted and recontextualized in a way that would help reveal their "original energy", and this energy would work "in the service of a different idea" (Moore, "Alan Moore").

Termed the "Victorian Justice League" by theorist Jason B. Jones, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is an assemblage of heroes and heroines from all walks of Victorian literature. The group is composed of outcasts and half-men, all of them so unstable that only the League is keeping them from self-destruction. The League resembles something more akin to a menagerie than a team of carefully trained secret agents on whose success hinges the

entire fate of the British Empire. One might accuse Moore of using these popular characters in order to gain some sort of interest from the non-comic-book readership. However, he claimed that he selected them because they serve a narrative purpose, and because both him and O'Neill felt that "they deserve a place in this […] definitive, playful mapping of the fictional universe" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 237). The fact that creating *The League* was "an obviously good commercial idea" and that selling the concept to the executives "didn't take much" is only a consequence of the idea's inherent universal appeal (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 236).

One of the themes that Moore loves to revise is the superhero narrative. The *revisionary superhero narrative*, a term coined by Geoff Klock, is constantly "re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating" of the narrative in order to "see again, so as to esteem and estimate differently, so as to aim 'correctively" (Bloom 4). First seen in George Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Miller tried to synthesize a great deal of lore spanning over forty-five years of the history of Batman. Comic books have the attribute of being "open-ended and can never be definitively completed, as even cancelled titles might be revived and augmented by creators," which often causes anomalies and contradictions within the narrative (Klock 26). What the revisionary superhero narrative strives to do is to tie all the loose ends into a coherent whole. *The League* is no different, as Moore admitted in the introduction to its unofficial companion that he and O'Neill set out to create "a Victorian super-hero team of previously existing characters" (A. Moore, Introduction 11). His treatment of the superhero narrative tackles both the social aspect of the concept, i.e. if superheroes were real, what would their role in society be, as well as the narrative aspect, such as how can one approach this archetypal plot in order to present it in a new way (Creekmur 287).

At the forefront of the superhero League we have the immortal Wilhelmina "Mina" Murray (née Harker), a social outcast due to her new-found status of divorcée. While choosing the male characters of the League was quite an easy feat, Moore admitted that finding a female counterpart was a far more difficult task. For a short time, he considered casting Irene Adler, one of few characters who manage to outwit great Sherlock Holmes; however, he went with Murray because he believed the readers would be able to identify more easily with her (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 219). He also found her character to be a more intriguing and mysterious persona, and he was much more interested to "speculate upon what sort of character she might have been after the events of *Dracula*" (Nevins, "Alan

Moore Interview" 219). Mina has high ideals, she is principled, and is blaringly independent. She is "the most directed, the most focused, the most dominating" within the group, which is interesting given that the other members are all male, and she is "absolutely fearless and doesn't take crap from anybody" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 230). The men around her are all much older than she is (with Griffin being the exception) and her youth and drive push her forward and energizes the group. Her personality naturally enforces order and commands respect of the people around her. This is why she is the natural leader of the group. Mina is the perfect representation of the "New Woman" that appeared at the turn of the nineteenth-century. The New Woman symbolizes "everything that was daring and revolutionary, everything that was challenging to the norms of female behaviour" (Cunningham 10). These tendencies can be found in her first appearance in Bram Stoker's novel as from that point onwards she has been repeatedly discussed within the literary community in the context of feminism. In *Dracula,* she doubles as both a feminine and a masculine character. Dr. Van Helsing even compliments her on the fact, noting that she has "a brain that a man should have were he much gifted", but also adding that she possesses a "woman's heart" as well (Stoker 281). Moore simply ran with these core elements and transformed her into an archetypal post-modern woman.

The other prominent character is Allan Quatermain, the character that inspired the *Indiana Jones* series, whom Moore pulled out from H. Rider Haggard's Victorian adventure fiction series. In both *King Solomon's Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*, Quatermain embodies the idea of heroic masculinity by taking on imperialist quests and adventures in the heart of Africa, which serve as the perfect "testing (or teething) ground for moral growth and moral regression" (Bratlinger 190). Haggard's stories are devoid of women and depict the enslavement of native Africans that the protagonist and his crew encounter during their extremely violent adventures. He is the "guy with a gun", as Moore states, as well as a "straightforward colonial adventurer" that was very popular in nineteenth-century Britain (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 220). Just as with the other characters in *The League*, Moore has taken Quatermain, which he described as being "other than Mina, the most human of the bunch," and reinvented him to represent the Victorian picture of the opium addict (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 221). As always, this reinvention does not go against what Haggard originally set up, but subtly augments it and exaggerates traits that were already there. In *Allan and the Ice-gods*, Haggard introduced the Taduki herb in order to send Quatermain into the past. Once there, he took over the body of his previous incarnation of Wi

the hunter, the "chief of a little tribe which had no name" (Haggard 37). Furthermore, a common aspect of Victorian London was the phenomenon of "slumming" where middle- and upper-class cosmopolites (mostly men) would travel to "the rougher parts of the capital to experience the excitement of working-class nightlife" and "observe the poor in their natural habitats" (Gray 146). Opium houses also served as one of the most popular places for the working-class migrants to "calm their fears of insecurity and poverty, to kill memories of long hours at the loom, the coal face or the plough" (Booth 60). Moore took both of these elements and fused them together. As he explains, if Quatermain had experimented in the past with Taduki, then he "could have ended up in an opium den in Cairo without too much difficulty" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 220). The drug-riddled adventurer is also no longer the leader; instead, he is managed by Mina Murray, a character that would have no place in Haggard's virile universe.

The third character on the roster is Captain Nemo from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea.* Moore states that he just knew that he had to incorporate Nemo into the League, because he is "the science-augmented hero, […] the techno hero," which reflects the steampunk genre of *The League*'s narrative (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 220). A true visionary, Nemo is the other leader of the group, and if it were not for Murray he would probably be at the forefront of the group. However, what makes him an unlikely candidate is the fact that he is fanatic efforts to destroy the British Empire have left him exhausted from taking charge. Funnily enough, Moore plays on the popular perception of this character by portraying him as he actually appears in the original book. Verne's story has been adapted multiple times on screen and the character of captain Nemo has been almost exclusively portrayed by white men, with the exception of Omar Sharif in *La Isla misteriosa y el capitán Nemo* (1973) and Naseeruddin Shah in the film adaptation of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003). Imprinted into the minds of audiences across the world is the image of a crazed, Caucasian scientific genius turned pirate, commanding his crew aboard the magnificent submarine *Nautilus*. However, both Moore and O'Neill were deeply surprised when they went on about creating their character: "when we looked at captain Nemo we discovered he didn't look anything like James Mason in the Walt Disney versions […] Nemo was an Indian prince, prince Dakar, which I'd never realized before" (Moore, "Moore Talks League"). In *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea,* Nemo is described by Professor Aronnax in the following way: "...I should be tempted to guess that the Captain and his mate were born in southern latitudes. There is something southern about them. But whether they

are Spaniards, Turks, Arabs or Indians, I cannot tell from their appearance" (Verne 62). While Moore tried to stay true to the book in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, there are still discrepancies between the original Nemo and the one appearing in the comic book. Moore and O'Neill vamped up their version of captain Nemo and changed him into a Sikh, which further emphasized his role as the fated "Other". An obvious swipe against British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonialism, all of Nemo's surroundings and even his attire is adorned with oriental and Indian designs, thus completely subverting the previous image of a deranged yet ingenious white man commanding the *Nautilus*.

Next, we have Dr. Jekyll, also known as Mr. Hyde. Taken from Robert Louis Stevenson's famous tale, Jekyll/Hyde is the natural continuation of the proverbial freak show that assembles the League. An obvious nod to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, Hyde is a large, bestial "thing", as he is often referred to in *The League*, a total counterpoint to his human alter-ego Dr. Jekyll, who is small in stature and of a nervous disposition. A true Victorian gentleman, Jekyll's English is perfect and he has a restrained demeanor which is completely different than Hyde's. Hyde, on the other hand, has the appearance of a gorilla and abhors wearing any sort of restrictive clothing, unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. He has the ability to see heat, with which he finds and immobilizes Griffin at the end of the second volume, and has great olfactory powers as well, as he demonstrates by picking up the scent of an injured Mina Murray within their headquarters, as well as the smell of "… **chinamen** and the **river**!" outside of the Limehouse (Moore, *The League I* 86/4, emphasis in the original). After many years of abusing the powers of the potion, the doctor no longer has to ingest it to turn into Mr. Hyde. Because of the changes that have occurred in his metabolism, his transformation is triggered by stress or any other intense emotion, making him a constant, volatile bomb of emotion (Moore, *The League I* 47/4). Though the transformation process is very unstable, the personhoods of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are completely separated. Instead of the traditional distinction between Dr Jekyll as the super-ego and Mr Hyde as the Id, Moore constructs Hyde as an "it", something extremely alien, indescribable, and inherently not human, as well as the ego of the two, since Jekyll rarely makes an appearance throughout the whole series. He even dies in his bestial shape and before charging into his final battle, he tears off his suit and tie that contain his monstrous form. It seems that Moore wants to show that the reality of Victorian society is not the morally upright Jekyll, but the sadistic, animalistic Hyde hiding behind over-starched collars and tight corsets.

The final member of *The League* is Hawley Griffin, the Invisible Man. In H. G. Wells' famous novel of the same name, we follow the misfortunate adventure of a young albino doctor named Griffin who develops a formula that can make him invisible. The process involves taking opium to make the blood "white - colorless – […] with all the functions it has now" and using a machine that utilizes rays unlike "Röntgen vibrations", rays that had not yet been discovered by physicists (Wells 60-61). The doctor is met with an untimely death in the street where he is "kicked to death by an enraged west Sussex mob", but in the graphic novel, Moore changes the story so that the albino was a mere guinea pig in the whole invisibility experiment (Moore, *The League I* 46/3). In his *League* version, the Invisible Man is even more ruthless and homicidal than his literary counterpart. In one scene, Griffin bludgeons a British police officer with a shovel then proceeds to yank the clothes off the body and puts them on, leaving the bloody corpse in the middle of the road without any remorse. He violates Mina Murray and degrades her as he does so, demanding her to call herself a "stuck-up little tart" (Moore, *The League II* 63/5-6). His reasons for joining the League are thoroughly self-serving: "I'm here to earn a pardon, and perhaps a cure. The only empire I'm interested in is my own: the empire of the Invisible Man the First" (Moore, *The League I* 51/2). Griffin represents pure British colonialism, callousness and cruelty of Victorian society, as well as the popularity of penny dreadfuls. Penny dreadfuls were sensational blood-and-thunder publications that boomed onto the Victorian scene during the 1860s. The stories usually revolved around the exploits of "highwaymen, famous criminals, and wild adolescent boys" (Rutherford 132). Aimed at young working-class readers, these installments were published periodically in novel form, which propelled a "moral panic" among the English population (Springhall 5).

In each character, Moore and O'Neill have integrated fact, fiction, and history. All of these elements intertwine, creating what Linda Hutcheon would term a metafictional parody. A parody attempts to come up with new forms and ideas from pre-existing elements to which the reader has become indifferent "through over-familiarization" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 37). It is a genre that unearths old literary techniques and conventions and creates "new literary codes" with the given material (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 38). Each parody denies the reader the possibility of identifying with the characters or the story – instead they are forced to take an active, "thinking" role in interpreting the given material (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 49). What Moore and O'Neill manage to create is an instance of "temporal telescoping" in which the reader is always evaluating whether or not an

element from the text is a mere caricature of Victorian culture or a factual element from that period (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative* 60).

The protagonists of *The League* are vastly different from one another and are pulled from various popular genres of the Victorian period. From adventure novels to horror and erotica, the characters make their debut by "pulling down the barriers between High Literature and pulp literature and pornography and low literary forms like that," creating an environment filled with a multiplicity of overlooked perspectives and voices (Nevins, *Blazing* 254). Superficial readers might be quick to write off the characters as being mere caricatures, but the characters are far more complex in their makeup. Gerhard Hoffman asserts that postmodern literature is inherently self-reflexive, in that it articulates doubts and expresses critical stances on the dualistic and incongruous nature of the world. These perspectives are explored through "the grotesque, the monstrous, and play, irony, parody and the comic mode" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 25). In this case, the focus will be put on the grotesque, the monstrous, the parody, and the satiric mode in order to determine under which category the characters of *The League* fall. The grotesque stems from satire, which uses incongruity (the disparity between social deformation and the moral ideal) and negation (the application of the moral ideal to social deformation) to criticize either "misguided individuals, larger segments of society, or society in toto" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 608). When moral ideals are no longer at the forefront of a work, satire turns to grotesque, and social deformation is substituted by the deformation of humans by humans (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 25). It is a term that is tightly connected to extremity, be it "extreme deformation," "disorientation" or "distortion" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 610). It offers neither hope in the present nor solace in the future. The monstrous is a postmodern offshoot of the grotesque, but it takes the concept further in its deformation as it has "no counterpoint and is indifferent to humane values, to care and compassion, responsibility and distinctions like victim and victimizer" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 611). There is no room for either rhyme or reason within a monstrous event. It is often an outburst of fate, something that eludes normal human understanding.

Lastly, parody blends the satirical and the comical in order to destabilize traditional conventions and values, thus producing a "free space for representing or creating the non-rationalizable, the nonfamiliarizable, in short, the 'other'" (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 619). These texts do not completely negate and eradicate the "old and

exhausted" conventions of language (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 617). Instead, they open the content in order to reformat and regenerate reified forms, in turn spurring them into mobility. Unlike satire, which denies and destroys vices and un-values, parody subverts and embraces them, infusing the text with something completely new (Hoffmann, *From Modernism to Postmodernism* 617). The characters of *The League* can be placed into almost all of these categories. Hyde can certainly be placed within the realm of the grotesque as he is both a moral and physical deformation of a proper nineteenth-century gentleman. Griffin, on the other hand, is a prime example of the monstrous, as he has seemingly no motivation to his actions other than that he is a psychopath, a remorseless monster. He is an invisible force that does not hesitate to kill a police officer with his bare hands or rape innocent women for his selfish pleasure. The other characters are a mixture of satire and parody, but none of them are negated or turned into one-dimensional caricatures, as Moore has tried to reevaluate and reapprase them in a new, recontextualized setting.

However, the element of caricature is present in the artwork of *The League*, which comes from a distinct preoccupation with history that has been ailing most comic books of the twenty-first century. In fact, there is a definite trend of exploiting nostalgia which has been popping up within graphic novels and other media as well. Authors have turned to historical sources in order to find new ways of telling stories. Exploiting history and heritage has provided a new way of "approaching imagining the future – that is, by situating it in the past" (Baetens and Frey 231). This is the reason why most of these kinds of narratives are actually science fiction stories. In the anthology *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, there are works such as Grant Morrison's *Dan Dare*, which looks as if it has been pulled from the pages of vintage science fiction comics (see Figure 5). Other works, such as *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,* approach history using the steampunk genre, by situating the story within an Edwardian/Victorian setting.

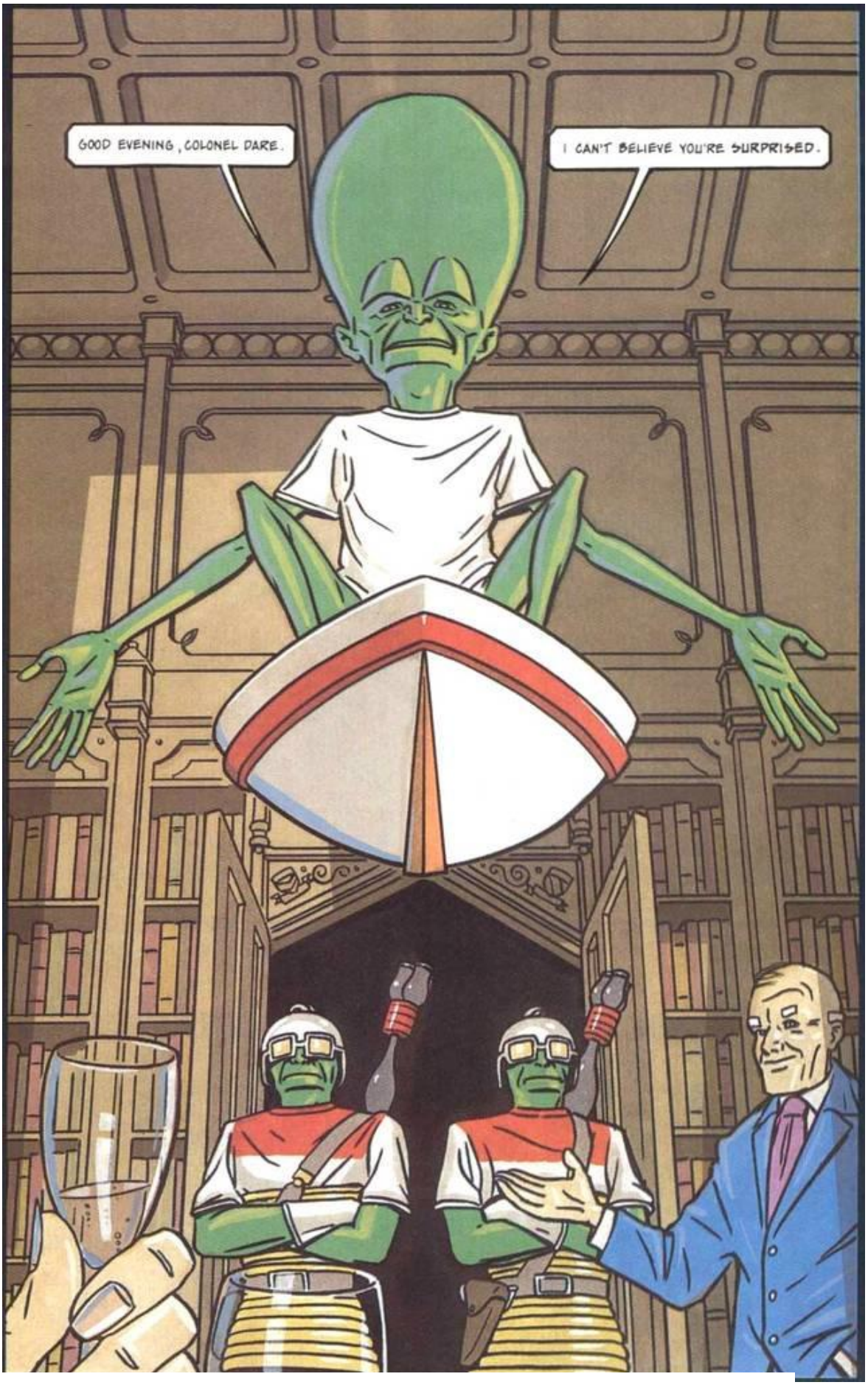

Fig. 5 (Morrison and Hughes, *Dan Dare* 69)

Most of the major graphic novel authors now function as historians, outlining the "temporal boundaries" and devising new ways of presenting their "definition of aesthetic traditions for readers to follow up on through the anthologies they have created or recommend" (Baetens and Frey 222). Graphic novel artists and authors are rehashing and looking for aesthetic content to enrich the style of their stories. The stories are usually too dated to be reused, but this shows that there is a clear break between the old comic books and the newer graphic novels. *The League* is no different, as it appropriates the style of the great British caricaturists, since it played a big part in encapsulating the Victorian milieu. As influental French author Charles Nodier once claimed, "England has been called a monarchy tempered by caricature", (qtd. in *The Wasp*, "The Art of Caricature" 5), so Moore's decision to employ Kevin O'Neill as the artist for the graphic novel is more than appropriate. Before working on *The League*, O'Neill illustrated and co-produced *Nemesis the Warlock* and *Marshall Law,* both extremely violent and satirical works that divulge upon authoritarian themes set in dystopian worlds. Marshall Law, for instance, is a BDSM clad bounty hunter tasked with finding any super hero that has gone off the grid of the government's radar. He takes great pleasure in hunting down the rogue heroes with the help of his assistant Danny, a wheelchair-bound computer whiz-kid, and Kiloton, a hulking bear of a man that works as Marshall Law's muscle. In all of his works, including *Marshall Law*, O'Neill favoured a grotesque style accented with a sharp linework and stories leaden with pop-culture references and dark, morbid humor. His work, just like Moore's, is deeply intertextual, drawing inspiration from books, movies, history, and popular tv shows.

Similarly, the characters in *The League* are drawn in an almost grotesque and absurd manner, their features exaggerated, very sharp, and flat. Moore himself has stated that O'Neill's art has "very strong traces of the often brilliant British juvenile comic book artists, like Leo Baxendale, people like Paddy Brennan, Dudley Watkins, and also great British caricaturists […] like Hogarth and Gillray" (Nevins, "Yellow Peril" 201). O'Neill's style incorporates jagged countoring and very expressive, almost misshapen faces. The characters are often reduced to only a few recognizable traits which is a familiar technique used in caricature, so Mina Murray immediately stands out with her vibrant green eyes and red scarf while Hyde is reduced to his hulking size, his hairiness, and animalistic features (see Figures 6 and 7). What Moore also points out is that O'Neill strength lies in evoking subtle, but powerful emotions. In *The League,* he writes scenes which are "simultaneously sexy, emotional, funny, silly, and quite genuinely horrifying, and somehow managing to all that at

once" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 210). Such versatility calls for an artist that is versitle as well, as Kevin is "just such an artist" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 210).

Fig. 4 (Moore, *The League I* 44/1)

Fig. 5 (Moore, *The League II* 11/3, 2).

6. Simulacra and Mirages: The Line between High- and Low-Brow (Graphic) Literature

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is historiographic metafiction, as it blends both history of the Victorian era with fictional elements and characters created during that literary period. By meshing the two together, Moore shines an interesting perspective on the relation between fact and fiction, and in turn simulates a reality which is a referent both in the imaginary and in the empirical world. Moore has stated that, in essence, *The League* is an "overt history of the popular imagination" and asserts that, to a certain extent, "the fictional world is completely interwtined and interdependent with the material world" (Tantimedh). The narratives surrounding and present within each culture influence the way that people act and behave in the world, as they posit a "representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence" (Althusser 162).

Moore and O'Neill are esentially pointing out that Victorian literature acts as a collection of artifacts from that time and that they "[reflect] a wide and incogruous range of Victorian desires and anxieties" (Rutherford 130). One of things that marks the Victorian era is its incompatible belief of preserving innocence and tradition, and simultaneously indulging in transgressive moral and sexual transgressions. During the Victorian era, the percentage of crime had risen after the mid-century which was distinctly defined by a consistent decline of criminality (Gray 231). There was a great divide between the wealthy and the poor overcrowded parts of London, that is, between the West End and the East End of London (Gray 231). The wealthier parts of the city were clean, organized places of good "proper" living, while the slums were a breeding ground for all kinds of horrible activities, and as much as Victorians upheld their morals and virtues, they were also obsessed with this dark aspect, and they revelled in the macabre, violence, and sexuality. Moore actively parodies both sides of Victorian England by inserting his narrative within the frame which mimics Victorian children's picture periodicals and by blatantly showing gory acts of violence and lurid sexuality that include numerous attempted and successful acts of rape, senseless murder, and drug abuse.

The League has many undulating twists and often turns the narrative on its head, so at times it "could be very sexual, it could be very funny, it could be very thrilling, or it could be completely horrific, or perhaps intellectually stimulating, all in the same couple of pages" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 140). It presents reality as just that – completely chaotic,

something that can be viewed and analyzed from various conflicting perspectives, and Moore does not just dwell on the Victorian times as he also uses *The League* to breach the topics that are plaguing modern (British) society. As a rule, Moore's work always seems to retain a tight connection with "distinctively English cultural, social, and aesthetic contexts", contexts which he often either satirizes or criticizes through his writing (Di Liddo 102). As Moore himself asserts, speaking about certain controversial topics, such as gender or race, is much easier "by transposing them to the safety of the Nineteenth century or the early Twentieth century" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 230). Setting the story in modern times complicates the issue because the problems are still very real, and people often feel threatened and even "overreact if presented with them in a present day context that seems to relate to their own lives" (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 230). By using the fantastic mode, Moore and O'Neill cause contradictions to come to the surface of the text, where the reader is forced to "confront all that it traditionally refuses to encounter" (Jackson 21). Like any modern fantasy, *The League* actively combats the "dominant hyerachial systems" of Victorian culture, as well as reflects the condition of today's society (Jackson 17) It is a perception that delineates the epistemological and ontological borders of the the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, as well as opens up the "closed system" of Victorian and modern life to create dissaray in apparent coherence and unity (Jackson 23).

Fig. 6 (Moore, *The League I* 154).

Another way that Moore and O'Neill use simulation is by presenting the *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* as a run-of-the-mill graphic novel. However, the authors have inserted colouring pages, Victorian-style advertisements, children's poems and games, decals and portraits, editor's warnings aimed at the young readers, and small works of fiction, such as *The New Traveler's Almanac* and the tale of *Allan and the Sundered Veil*. O'Neill appropriates all of the available penny dreadfulls and chapbooks, and has incorporated real pages from the issues, in turn creating a constant mixture between the past and the present, making *The League* a perfect blend of the Victorian times and the twenty-first century. For instance, an advertisement that can be seen on page 154 in the first installment of *The League*, titled *The Rival*, is actually an unaltered ad taken from the back cover of an actual penny dreadful (see Figure 6) (Nevins, "Annotations" 99). There is another ad in the third issue of *The League*, which is neither included in the hardcover nor the softcover versions, advertising three different corsets for men ("The Marlboro," "The Kitchener," and "The Carlton") (Nevins, "Annotations" 129-130). Furthermore, O'Neill and Moore have purposefully designed the covers of *The League* to emulate the look of Victorian publications. The cover of the second issue of the first volume depicts playing cards showing the faces of *The League's* protagonists, the central one paying homage to *Blue Dwarf* cigarettes, a once popular penny dreadful character (see Figure 7). Similarly, the cover of the fourth issue of the same volume pays homage to "early Arsène Lupin publications", while the next issue is made in the likeness of "[a] late Victorian book cover, the sort that had [an] image printed on [a] cloth bound cover and an inset full colour image pasted on" (Nevins, "Annotations" 118-119). There is an

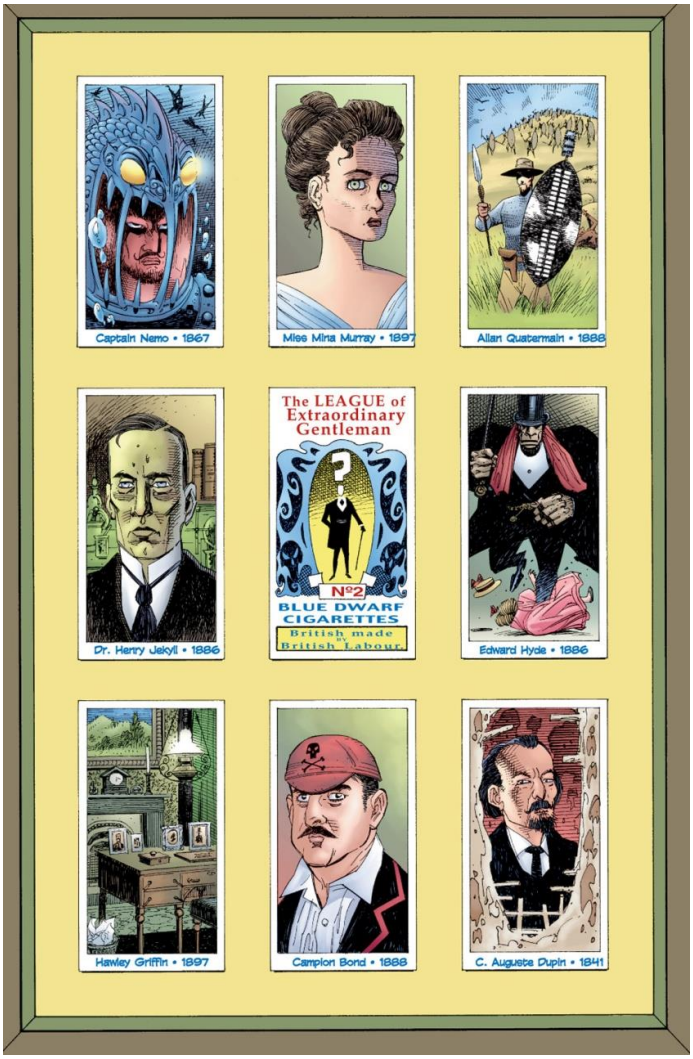

Fig. 7 (Moore, *The League I* 179)

obvious conflict between what is being presented to the readers and what the readers are actually getting. In Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, he defines simulation as a phenomenon which "threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false, 'between 'real' and imaginary'" (4). A simulation supplants "signs of the real for the real itself," creating clones and doubles that bypass all the fluctuations contained within the real (Baudrillard 4). The result is a simulacrum which acts as "the reflection of a basic reality", as it "masks and perverts a basic reality", "masks the *absence* of a basic reality," and "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 11). *The League* is a simulacrum of what a penny dreadful should be and what it should look like, but Moore and O'Neill "perform what we might term a Brechtian move, forcing readers to confront the political implication of the genre's form instead of allowing them simply to immerse themselves in plot" (Ferguson 202). The question "What actually constitutes a comic book?" is constantly being reiterated throughout the whole series and Moore simulates eighteenth-century print in order to create the effect of a Victorian reality and to also examine the legitimacy of this reality. Under the guise of being "a trashy tabloid or a cloth-bound classic," the graphic novel forces the reader to "establish a connection and see the similarities and mutual interactions between what is now known as comics and whatever medium the cover has disguised itself" (Thoss).

All of these elements serve to challenge the reader's self-awareness and question the very form and content of the narrative. The metafictional components are extraneous to the fundamental story – on the one hand they serve to conjure up an image of what reading a Victorian juvenile magazine would be like, but on the other hand they subvert the comic book form and expand on it, creating connections between the graphic novel and other media. Interestingly enough, neither of the authors actually reference *The League* as being a comic or a graphic novel. The cover of the first volume announces that what lies ahead is a "grand new picture paper". O'Neill is presented as a famous Victorian artist that illustrated the "Queen Victoria and Emily Pankhurst Girl-on-Girl Novelty Flipbook" and Moore as the author of many penny dreadfuls and chapbooks, genres that were extremely popular in nineteenth-century England. The connection between graphic novels, comics, and penny dreadfuls has been pointed out by many notable comic book historians. Roger Sabin sees the comic book medium as a natural offshoot of the penny dreadful and chapbook tradition (Sabin, *A History* 11). David Kunzle shares a similar sentiment on the topic, as he draws parallels that go all the

way back to Rodolphe Töpffer and Hogarth.[1] What Moore and O'Neill seem to be doing is showing the audience that although there has been an emergence of a more mature, more serious, and more expensive comic book format, this will not extinguish crude, cheap, and childish books. The seeds of the predecessor will always be present in the graphic novel, no matter how much publishers try to abolish it. Furthermore, the text is embedded within a framework of a faux nineteenth-century juvenile "picture-periodical," the world is presented and interpreted for the "manly, outwardgoing youngster of today" by the all-knowing, judicious, and stern editor S. Smiles, while the graphic novel is penned by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill, which grounds the whole work within our reality (Moore, *The League I* 3, 47). The narrative works on multiple levels and so, one could analyze the work from the perspective of a reader looking into a graphic novel, a youthful lad leafing through the "Boys Picture Monthly", or an alien observing a sister planet. History is not discarded, but is restructured and subverted in order to examine the pervasive ideologies, traditions, and beliefs of a certain time period in order to challenge the preconceived ideas on history and society. The only way one can actually access a point in time in history is through pure textuality, but even then, the reader cannot gain anything but a glimpse or one perspective of the past. Alternatively, the reader can play along and be a willing participant in the simulacrum. The result is an ironic projection of a culture long gone that reflects present anxieties.

The League also intervenes in the genre of children's literature by incorporating outrageous storylines and visuals that are inconsistent with the idea of literature designed specifically for children. For instance, on the penultimate page of the first volume of the *League,* the reader can find a maze game titled "Alan has mislaid his Taduki. Can you help him find it?" (see Figure 8) (Moore, *The League I* 198). This is followed by the editor's instruction stating that this activity is "recommended for age five and upwards" and just by giving the page the once-over, the reader could conclude that the maze is a game intended for children. However, there are many discrepancies between what is being presented and what the game actually is. A child's game should be easy to solve in just a few seconds, but O'Neill specifically designed the maze to be unsolvable. A parallel can be drawn between postmodern literature and open-ended elements of *The League's* text. This fragmentary, incomplete nature is a direct correlation and reflection of our empirical world, the inability of the human race to

[1] Eighteenth-century artist and satirist William Hogarth is one of the first modern sequential story tellers, his most famous sequential works being *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) and *The Rake's Progress* (1735). Both engravings act as visual parables which show the downfall of those who seek out to fulfil their base indulgences and needs. Rodolphe Töpffer is frequently cited as the father of comic book art. His 1837 book *Histoire de M. Vieux Bois* is considered to be the first comic book in the history of the medium.

have and acquire complete and universal knowledge. There are also other elements that signal that the game is not a children's game. First, there is a scandalous illustration of an exotic and statuesque priestess naked from the waist up, meditating among the fumes on the bottom left. Above her a Morlock stands, perched, raising his bloody fists in rage. Secondly, the Taduki that is a highly addictive narcotic with which one can "easily escape one's present self and circumstances", and most importantly, "rend the veil of Time and be immersed in former lives," is being sought out and is the ultimate prize at the end of the maze (Moore, *The League I* 156). Children's maze games usually do not require the solver to find their way to drug substances. Lastly, the instruction is lampooning the instructive and often condescending tone that elders use when talking to children. In it the editor of *The League* S. Smiles laments over the fate of "poor Mr. Quatermain" who is in the throes of a withdrawal from drug addiction and is in search of "the numinous narcotic, or, failing that, an understanding pharmacist" (Moore, *The League I* 198). Postmodern fiction is always trying to work "within conventions in order to subvert them" and is constantly trying to rework the pervasive belief that the world operates in a logocentric fashion (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 5). It replaces this philosophy with the assertion that truth is a mere illusion and that human creations and constructs are not an absolute (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 5). In postmodern works, everything is subjected to play, parody, and irony.

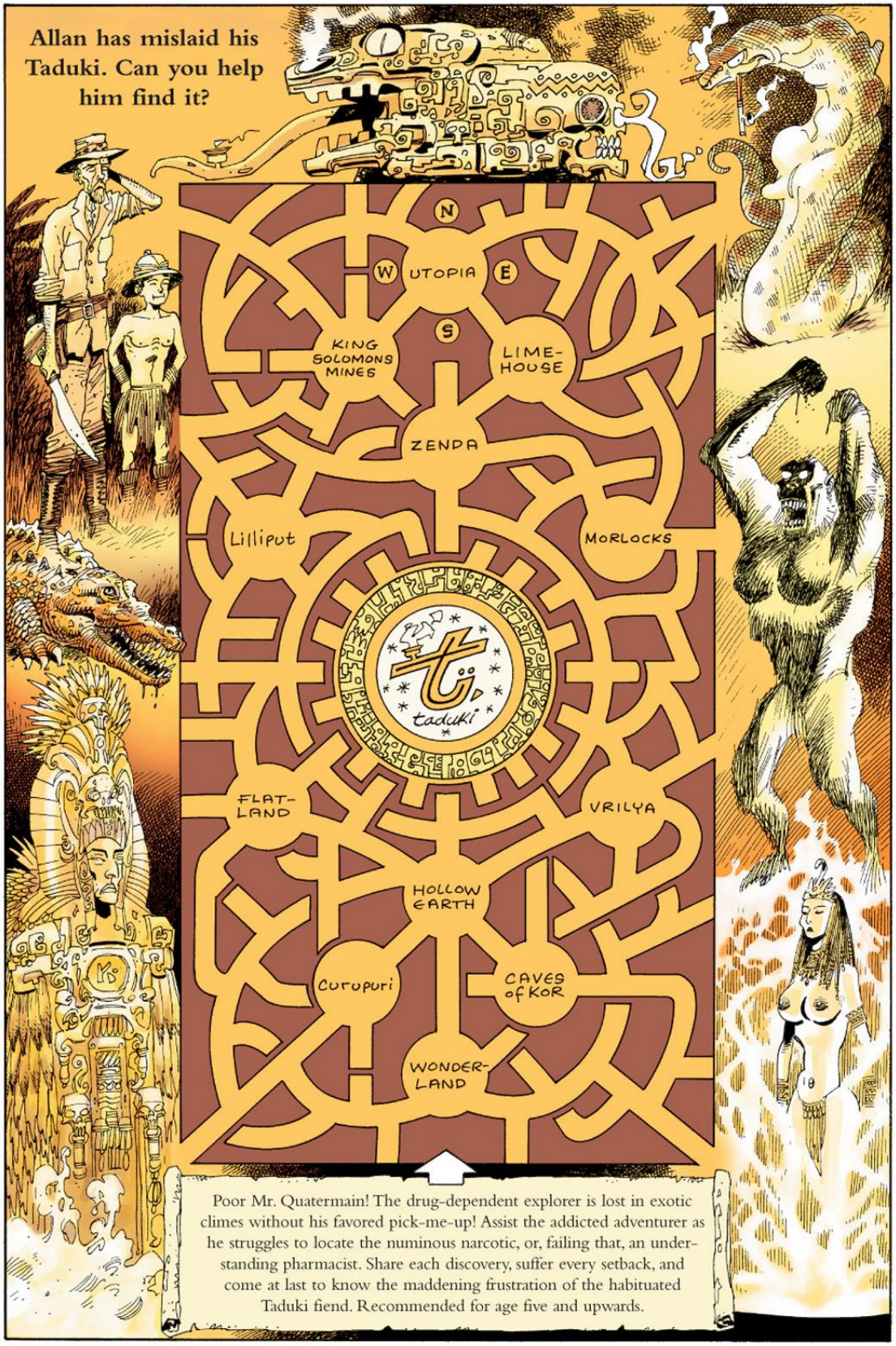

Fig. 8. (Moore, *The League I* 190)

Conclusion

In one interview, Moore states that he is "still having lots of fun borrowing other peoples' property and rampaging through the field of copyrighted characters" ("Alan Moore"). *The League* is just a culmination of his tendencies of layering references to pop culture, music, film, classical literature, and other media. Despite all the evidence of *The League*'s in-depth textuality, Moore manages to weave different narratives, drawing most of his inspiration from the tradition of the novel. As a writer, he is constantly trying to "translate some of the intellect and sensibilities" that can be found within the pages of some book "into something that will work on a comics page" (Burbey 78-79). He mixes both contemporary and traditional forms of literature, and believes that an artist has to explore all of the medium's possibilities in order to "approach his or her own context", as well as adjust "the form of his or her art to the continuous changes that contemporary society is exposed to" (Di Liddo 29). For Moore, art should be a distorting mirror held up to society and reflect on the problems that are plaguing today's society. When a piece of art manages to articulate on the context from which it originates, it proves that the artist is aware of the discrepancies between the past and the present.

The *League* is an attempt to mix homage to the Victorian past as well as a serious critique of the era, its pervasive ideas, ideologies, and traditions. The ever-present trend of nostalgia that has been permeating the comic book industry reflects in a way the current state of postmodernist comics. The concept of nostalgia stems in part from the pervasive feeling that there is "something problematic or limiting about [history]," as it in part yearns to relive history, but also revise it and narrate about it in a more acceptable way (Baetens and Frey 228). Postmodern works such as *The League* take up the element of nostalgia in an act of self-parody in order to show the inevitable fictionalization of such undertakings. When a postmodernist text plays with real events, it alters it and transforms it in such a way that fiction almost becomes a credible version of reality, which is equally real and unreal as an empirical reality. In *The League*, the world of the story is set in Victorian England, and Victorian England is part of the empirical history, but the steampunk elements, the inclusion of popular fictional characters, the obvious satirical slant to the story, as well as the use of jagged caricatured illustrations all point to the conclusion that the historical narrative has the structure of a fictional narrative, i.e. history is narrated as fiction, hence history is fiction.

In *The League*, Moore and O'Neill are actively dissecting the graphic novel format, but also showcasing the process that Victorian publications, especially those aimed at children, as well as caricature, had in the creation of comics. Since *The League* takes place (i.e. the first two volumes) during the Victorian times, both Moore and O'Neill have incorporated a plethora of textual and visual evidence showing the roots of the comic book medium, such as the penny dreadful books and chapbooks (Nevins, "Alan Moore Interview" 140). As much as Moore and O'Neill are are wont to admit it, *The League* is an attempt to legitimize the comic book medium. By observing the genealogy of comics, the authors have inadvertently mixed highbrow literary sources with lowbrow ones, thereby equalizing the two and creating a new postmodern hybrid which will not be weighed down by its history. History is the place where the process of exclusion from literary and artistic circles can be tackled head on. In *The League*, there is a constant process underway where the text is being intertwined with science fiction, history, fiction, and pop culture. This allows Moore and O'Neill to be admitted into the literary world, as well as provide ample evidence of "the sharp and significant lines that exist between late nineteenth-century popular fiction and the later world of comics, American superheroes, and the graphic novel" (Baetens and Frey 212). This is the reason why the academia should strive more to evaluate and analyze graphic novels in a way that does not undermine them, but show that the genre is a complex cultural production that deserves a serious approach.

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Abstract

This paper explores the postmodern and fantastic aspects of Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, while simultaneously delineating the differences between comic books and graphic novels. In the first section of the text, the author explicates the history and development of the art of comics, then describes the borders between the comic book and the graphic novel genre. In order to surmount the already confusing classification of both categories, the author uses the complexity theory proposed by Achim Hescher to distinguish traditional/lengthy comic books from graphic novels. When one applies the theory on the first two volumes of *The League*, the work resembles more of an extended or augmented comic book than a conventional graphic novel. This result makes perfect sense considering that one of the primary intents of the authors is to connect the comic tradition with Victorian print media and literature. In the next section of the text, the author touches upon the postmodern and the fantastic elements that are located within the world of *The League*, which Moore seamlessly blends in his steampunk narrative. Both Moore and O'Neill enforce a process of constant intertwinement of science fiction, history, fiction, and pop culture, which allow them to be admitted into the literary world, as well as provide ample evidence of the ties that bind the late nineteenth-century popular fiction with the comic book medium, including the graphic novel. In the last segment, the author shows that Moore has created an effective simulation of the Victorian era, which serves to challenge the reader's self-awareness and question the very form and content of the narrative. On the one hand, the metafictional components serve to conjure up an image of what reading a Victorian juvenile magazine would be like and on the other hand subvert the comic book form and expand on it, creating connections between the graphic novel and other media. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is a highly interesting graphic work as it integrates, both visually and textually, the low-brow, juvenile comic books with high-brow literary tradition. The graphic novel, first seen as a mere capitalist category and marketing scheme, is actually shown to be a natural continuation of the comic book medium. Comic books and graphic novels are not exclusive to each other, nor is the one better than the other genre. *The League* demonstrates the flexibility and hybridity of these genres and formats, which is an ever-present theme in most postmodern works, as well as shows the close connections between postmodern fiction the fantastic.

Keywords: postmodern, fantastic, comic book, graphic novel, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*