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The Graphic Novel—Paper #1: Graphic Analysis of *The Sandman, Volume One*

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In this paper I will give my analysis of some of the visual aspects of *The Sandman, Preludes & Nocturnes* by Neil Gaiman. Since much of visual language is based on style and personal taste, it is impossible to be objective, so keep in mind that this is my own opinion.

Overall, I would rate the graphic / visual side of the book as a 3 out of a possible 5. The imagery, without a doubt, has certain aspects that, on their own, are quite impressive. However, there are other un-ignorable aspects that could use quite a bit of improvement, and often have a tendency to ruin the affects of the more successful visual language. To make a metaphor: it is much like having an otherwise beautifully correct sentence (grammatically speaking) with “ain’t” in the middle of it.

To start with, I’ll take a look at the volume’s cover-art, done by Dave McKean. If I had the choice, and Vertigo had the time, I would have had Dave McKean illustrate the entire story; I would rate this aspect a 5/5 overall. His dark, surreal style matches perfectly with the content of the story, and is much more cohesive and unique than the ink + color approach which was ultimately used.

But, alas, Dave McKean could not illustrate the whole story for various different reasons, so I will now look at my least favorite aspect of the graphic language:

the coloring, done by Robbie Busch. I had some major issues here, and am going to have to rate the coloring as a 1/5. The coloring, especially when compared to the story and illustration, seems like it wasn't considered at all; the colors chosen are often arbitrary "stock colors"—chosen not for their potential to carry a message or further a certain idea or emotion, but just because they "were there". Maybe the most disappointing part of this downfall is that the potential for *any* color was there (they did print the volume using the four-color halftone process) but was completely neglected.

On a lighter note: the illustration, done by Sam Keith, Mike Dringenberg, and Malcolm Jones III. This work is what really saved the story from being trashed after the coloring; I would rate it 4/5. Though I was in general approval of the consideration that was given to lighting and line tone / texture to further the story's atmosphere, I had some issues with some of the characters looking a bit cartoon-y at times. It can be so distracting when a character or background is drawn poorly, and often makes it hard to take the story seriously.

The illustration moves far beyond rendering, however. One of my favorite aspects of the illustration was the carefully considered page composition and framing. The panel composition, and movement therein, took on a character of its own which could only add to the atmosphere and setting of the story. Likewise, the page and panel framing—though subtle at times—consisted of ornamentation and themes that were perfectly in line with what was happening on that spread. Just as much as using these devices were successful, so was not using them;

the illustrators knew when to use restraint and were wise in determining when the illustration should play a more integral role in the story-telling.

The final aspect I will look at is the lettering, done by Todd Klein. On the whole, everything seemed to be very well-considered; I'd rate it a 4/5. One of the great strengths of the lettering is its use as a means to classify the words that are being written; it is easy to tell who is talking or thinking, not only because of the word balloon's basic shape, but also because of its stylistic traits.

Apart from clarifying who is actually speaking, the balloon and lettering style also gives a good indication as to the tone and character of the speaker's voice. These variations from the standard lettering created a great dynamic, and were successfully used to allow the characters to escape the monotone quality of the two standard "weights" of lettering. In some ways, I wish I could have seen Klein's skill shine *just a bit* more, especially at the beginning of the volume, before the arrival of Lucifer or Dee.

As a side note, I feel that one of the most under-appreciated aspects of storytelling through comics is the lettering. With the freedom of hand-lettering, even the most subtle typographic dynamics are possible—dynamics that are *almost* non-existent in paragraphs like this one.

So in conclusion, this volume of *The Sandman* has its ups and downs, as far as the visual language goes, but ultimately the lack of consideration in some areas can be made up for with the great attention in other areas.