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Rationale for Saga of the Swamp Thing, Volume 1

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Saga of the Swamp Thing: Book One

By Alan Moore, Steve Bissette, and John Totlebon

Rationale by James Bucky Carter, the University of Texas at El Paso

Grade Level and Audience

This graphic novel is recommended for high school English classes.

Plot Summary

This volume features the first scripts celebrated writer Alan Moore penned for the award-winning comic book series by the same title (issues #20-27). In the first story, Swamp Thing mourns the death of Arcane, an adversary and relative of good friend Abigail “Abby” Cable. Seeing Arcane as a defining foil, Swamp Thing feels that whereas he had his humanity taken from him when his body suffered an explosion and was subsequently decomposed by the Louisiana swamps in which he worked as scientist Alec Holland, Arcane was born human and then worked to remove his humanity by becoming a powerful but grotesque foe. Meanwhile, the Sunderland corporation makes plans to kill Swamp Thing and all who know of his existence.

The second story arc shows Sunderland’s attempt to make good on its plan, with Lizabeth Tremayne and lover Dennis Barclay talking over their relationship and barely escaping death from Sunderland’s goons. Abby and husband Matt Cable have relationship troubles stemming from Abby’s devotion to Alec and Matt’s growing use of magic and alcohol. Swamp Thing is confronted by Sunderland operatives, shot, frozen, and delivered to Sunderland’s leader, Mr. Sunderland himself. Mr. Sunderland employs Jason Woodrue, a deranged botanist and recently released criminal, to study the corpse. Woodrue, also known as the villain the Floronic Man, a human-vegetable hybrid, learns that Holland did not transform into Swamp Thing, as was previously thought, but, rather, Holland’s consciousness infected or possessed existing plant life in the swamp, which then attempted to recreate a human form based on the memories of the possessing cognizance.

Woodrue plans Sunderland’s murder; new vegetation stems from a thawed Swamp Thing, reanimating him, and Woodrue follows Swamp Thing back to the swamp. There, Woodrue roots the creature’s body to the earth and uses Swamp Thing’s ability to connect with “the green” (all the world’s vegetation) to connect himself to it and listen to its wishes. Woodrue interprets that the green seeks revenge on humanity for destroying so much of it, and he goes on a rampage through several small towns before revealing to the world that he is forcing plants to produce ten times the oxygen they usually emit, which will ultimately end in the death of humanity. The remaining essence of Alec Holland searches for identity and comes to terms that it no longer truly represents the soul of Holland but something different. Swamp Thing, embracing his unique identity, learns of Woodrue’s plans, notices how the deranged man has twisted the true desires of the green, and defeats what turns out to be a much more appropriate foil than Arcane ever was.

The final arc features Abby's new job at Baton Rouge's Elysium Lawns Center for autistic Children. Paul, a teenage resident, must spell things correctly and asks others to do so, does not like to be touched, and draws pictures of a white demon he calls the monkey king. He feels that misspelling leads to death. The monkey king is actually a demon that feeds off of fear. It was released when Paul's parents misspelled a word while innocently playing with a Ouija board. The demon seeks Paul as his master and torments him and the other children. The mystic Jason Blood senses the monster's presence and visits to dispose of it. Blood reveals to Abby that he shares his body with the hero/anti-hero known as Etrigan the Demon and helps Abby, Swamp Thing, and Paul defeat the monkey king. Paul overcomes his fear, causing the monkey king to shrink. Etrigan then eats the shrunken beast. During the foray, Abby's drunken husband stops using his magic to create scenarios where Abby is paying him what he feels is adequate amounts and types of attention and drives to help in the battle. He crashes the car and is mortally injured, however, and is approached by a large insect that offers a deal that will keep him alive.

Strengths and Unique Characteristics of the Work

Saga of the Swamp Thing is a well-crafted, multi-faceted narrative that combines the magical realism with literal ecological concerns like few other works of any kind. Moore's writing is powerful and exquisite; the art creates mood, pitch, and tenor exactly in line with the scripting. The Swamp Thing creature offers opportunities for exploring humanity and its connection to land *and* fellow man.

Possible Objections

There are several suggested sexual situations, but no actual nudity or intercourse is ever shown. Elizabeth Tremayne and Dennis Barclay talk about a one-night stand they have shared; Matt Cable discusses his sexual frustration with wife Abby and concocts magic images of her in lingerie and at one time levitates some of her clothing to create a "ghost image" of her. He asks the floating clothing to "get on your knees and apologize," which may be read as a directive for oral sex and/or as general misogynistic behavior, but it is understood that Cable is not well mentally, and any reference to sex must be inferred from the reader. None are direct and no vulgar language is used to describe any sexual act. One child from Elysium Lawns charges at Abby. He does not wear clothes but his leg is raised to cover his private parts. The most overt possible objections might stem from depictions of Southerners as simple or successful businessmen as untrustworthy and crazed or from the many allusions to mysticism, magic, devils and demons.

Ideas for Thematic Braidings

There are many texts that illustrate the land or nature reacting to the poor decisions of humanity, such as the Arthurian Legends, or Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, and *Richard III*,

just as it does in this graphic novel. *Swamp Thing*'s appearance was always meant to inspire thoughts of Frankenstein's monster, and pairing the title featuring a lumbering pseudo-human's search for his place in the world and among humans could make for a great pairing with the Shelley novel. The mix of mysticism, strange drama and a Southern setting suggests that book can be read as an example of Southern gothic literature and could be used with select writings from William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, and Eudora Welty. *Saga of the Swamp Thing* may be seen as an excellent example of the grotesque via irony: *Swamp Thing* is the flinch-inducing monster, but he often helps those that have fallen victim to actual hideous behavior from human beings. This volume's strong focus on ecology ties the book to many exemplary novels such as M.T. Anderson's *Feed, Eva* by Peter Dickinson, and Eric Campbell's *The Place of the Lions*.¹

Ideas for Implementation

One might begin discussing *Saga of the Swamp Thing* simply by asking students to brainstorm thoughts on an illustration of the hero. The one hyperlinked [herein](#)² depicts the creature seemingly at one with nature. Ask students to discuss what the image represents to them and how it may or may not match up with ideas of heroism, monstrosities, and/or ecology.

Awards

1985 Kirby Award for Best Writing

1986 Kirby Award for Best Writing

1985 Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series

1986 Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series

1987 Jack Kirby Award for Best Continuing Series³

(These awards are for the series, not necessarily for the specific issues presented in *Saga of the Swamp Thing: Book 1*, which reprints work originally published in 1984)

Reviews

“Perhaps the brainiest and scariest horror narrative of the ‘80s” – *Rolling Stone*.

“...a brilliant, cerebral, and challenging piece of art” – John Hogan, *Graphic Novel Reporter*.⁴

“Alan Moore's *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is an undeniable classic of modern comics. It's a creative run that absolutely should be read by all.” – Jesse Sheedeen, *IGN*⁵

Resources/References

¹ <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring96/schwarz.html>

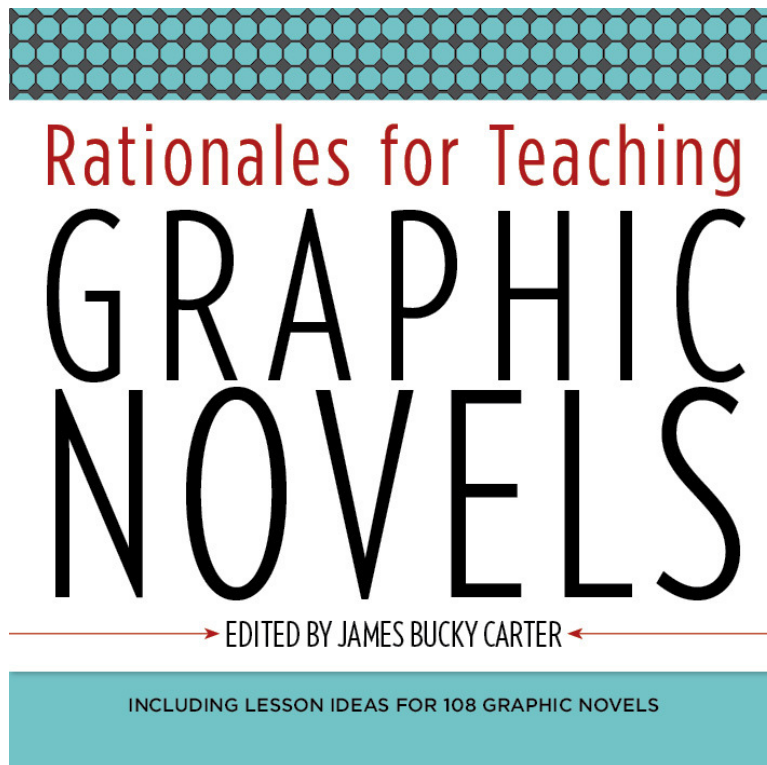
² <http://www.comicsbulletin.com/vertigo/images/0809/swamptpb.jpg>

³ <http://www.hahnlibrary.net/comics/awards/kirby.php>

⁴ <http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com/content/saga-swamp-thing-book-1-review>

⁵ <http://comics.ign.com/articles/954/954448p1.html>

For rationales for teaching 107 more graphic novels, see this resource:



available at <http://www.maupinhouse.com>