

ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies



ISSN: 1549-6732

Volume 8, Issue 2 (2015).

<http://www.engl...alante/index.shtml>

World of My Own: *Joe the Barbarian* and the Cathartic Power of Fantasy

By Nick Galante

The Tradition of the Otherworld

- 1 The use of fantasy to reflect the real world is a well-established practice. Writers have long used fantastic worlds as a means of examining, critiquing, or otherwise throwing light upon aspects of our own lives and societies. Grant Morrison's fondness and even reverence for fantastic stories and the power that they wield over our everyday lives is well documented; *Supergods* alone serves as a powerful testament to this belief. In the introduction, Morrison proposes that "superhero stories speak loudly and boldly to our greatest fears, deepest longings, and highest aspirations," that they "deal directly with mythic elements of human experience that we can all relate to, in ways that are imaginative, funny, and provocative" and even "help us to confront and resolve even the deepest existential crises" (xvii), but it is clear throughout the rest of the book that this belief extends beyond the simple superhero story to encompass stories of all kinds. These fantastic tales are powerful tools that hold a very special lens to the modern world and allow us to view it in ways that we never before imagined. While this is a concept that is always at the forefront of Morrison's mind and features prominently in his works, nowhere is this theme more prevalent than in *Joe the Barbarian*, an eight-issue limited series from 2010-2011.

2 The series tells the tale of a 13-year-old boy as he journeys from his attic to his basement in a quest to restore electricity to his darkened house. Though on the surface this sounds rather mundane, his journey is complicated by the fact that Joe is diabetic, and during the descent his blood sugar is dangerously low—to the point of hypoglycemic shock—and as a result he finds himself slipping in and out of a fantasy world. In this new realm, Joe is hailed as the Dying Boy, a Messianic figure whose coming was prophesied centuries before by a mad sewer-dwelling Dwarf king. According to prophecy, the Dying Boy is the only person capable of vanquishing King Death, the immortal terror that threatens to envelop the entire kingdom in lifeless night.

3 In a 2010 interview with IGN, Morrison stated that *Joe the Barbarian* was a part of the tradition of stories "where some kid goes through the mirror or down the staircase into a weird world" (Phillips 1). He cites "things like Narnia and Lewis Carroll" as major influences on the story, and lists "*Elidor. The Phantom Tollbooth. Yellow Submarine. Peter Pan. The Wizard of Oz*" as additional examples of the genre (1). Though the narrative of *Joe the Barbarian* is a unique one, the core structure of the story—that of a child escaping into another, more fantastic realm than our own—is hardly revolutionary.

4 This type of story, which Morrison calls the "quest through the Otherworld," is a very familiar one: a child or teenager leaves their mundane lives in the real world to adventure in a fantastical realm (1). Along the way, the child encounters strange sights as well as a few of the equally strange denizens of this world, some of whom become useful friends or powerful allies, while others serve as terrible enemies. Though the child always returns home (often, but not always, after a certain degree of self-discovery or personal growth), readers cannot help but feel that the hero was much better off in the otherworld than in our boring reality. As Morrison himself noted, many authors before him have followed this type of storyline with great success. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which perhaps serves as the most noteworthy example of this type of story, will celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2015, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* will be 115 that same year. The adventures of Little Nemo began over a century ago, and it's even been sixty years since the Pevensie children made their first trek through the wardrobe. The device is by no means a novel one, but what sets *Joe the Barbarian* apart, what makes it a truly "Morrisonian" tale, is the way that Morrison presents the fantasy world, as well as the themes that he uses that world to explore. While serving as a classic example of a Quest through the Otherworld story, *Joe the Barbarian* deals heavily with the perception of reality and fantasy and uses the interplay between the two to delve into psychology, primarily with respect to the ideas of grief, repression, and catharsis.

5 Through the narrative, Morrison strives to express a belief that is common to a number of his works; namely, that fantasy is just as important and

influential as reality. Joe's inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not reflects Morrison's belief that the two do not exist as polar opposites. Fantasy, even in the form of a hallucination brought on by life-threatening hypoglycemia, is not without meaning, and can even be beneficial.

The Nature of Fantasy

6 Neurologist Oliver Sacks, in *Hallucinations*, discusses several varieties of hallucinations, as well as their respective symptoms, features, and causes. Among these is what he calls the altered state hallucination, which he describes as "an abnormal activation of the visual system" (98). Though the use of mind-altering drugs is by far the most common trigger for these hallucinations, Sacks (citing Heinrich Klüver) lists half a dozen other such causes of this abnormal activation, one of which is hypoglycemia. Sacks further describes the experience of an altered state hallucination, explaining that:

The experience of color is often heightened, sometimes to an unearthly level [...]. There may be sudden changes in orientation or striking alterations of apparent size. There may be micropsia or Lilliputian vision (little beings—elves, dwarves, fairies, imps—are curiously common in these hallucinations), or there may be gigantism (macropsia). There may be exaggerations or diminutions of depth and perspective or exaggerations of stereo vision—or even stereo hallucinations, seeing three-dimensional depth and solidity in a flat picture." (102)

Joe's experiences in his Otherworld fit well within the criteria that Sacks describes. The hallucination is filled with vibrant colors that serve as a stark contrast to the muted tones found in reality. Likewise, the size of the house and its contents are distorted greatly when Joe shifts into the Otherworld: diminutive figures such as Jack or Joe's toys become gigantic, surpassing Joe in height. This transformation is shown most keenly when Joe, Chakk, and Smoot traverse the Steppenfell mountains, a formation of large, rectangular stones arranged in a step formation, flanked on either side by stone pillars. "Is that where my kitchen is?" Joe asks, peering over the edge and into the abyss below (Morrison and Murphy 72). The following page shows the reality: Joe is face-down at the top of an ordinary staircase. In his hallucination, the steps have become the large flagstones, the banisters have become the columns, and the browns and greys of reality have been changed to purples and oranges (72-73).

Alternative content

If you are reading this text please install [Adobe Flash Player](#). Once installed will allow you to play the *ImageText Comics Viewer* here in your browser.

Alternative content

If you are reading this text please install [Adobe Flash Player](#). Once installed will allow you to play the *ImageText Comics Viewer* here in your browser.

7 While there are elements of Joe's hallucination that are drawn from his reality, Sacks notes that hallucinations tend to be largely meaningless, without any purpose or higher significance. He states that those who experience hallucinations "almost uniformly emphasize their meaninglessness, their irrelevance to events and issues of their lives" (229). While Sacks posits that hallucinations may have shaped beliefs in elves, ghosts, and even the divine, the appearance of said visions does not inherently communicate anything about the hallucinating individual. The notable exception to this, however, is the hallucination associated with trauma or strong emotion. Sacks states:

The emotions here can be of various kinds: grief or longing for a loved person or place [...] terror, horror, anguish, or dread following deeply traumatic, ego-threatening or life-threatening events. Such hallucinations may also be provoked by overwhelming guilt for a crime or sin that, perhaps belatedly, the conscience cannot tolerate. (230)

These hallucinations serve, then, as expressions of emotion or desire. Sacks notes that hallucinations where the subject sees a deceased loved one are surprisingly common occurrences. This causes the grief-based hallucination to serve as a kind of wish fulfillment, filling the void left by the deceased by presenting them as alive and well.

8 Though Joe's hallucination meets the criteria that Sacks outlines for an altered state, the experience is not without meaning, and the content of the hallucination is in fact more in line with that of a grief-based hallucination. Joe has lost his father, but the manifestation of Joe's grief is not the simple wish fulfillment that Sacks describes. As a result of his father's death, Joe and his mother are in danger of losing their house, and consequently Joe's father has become the target of their scorn and condemnation (Morrison and Murphy 8). Therefore, rather than simply presenting Joe's father as alive and well, the hallucination portrays him as two conflicting figures: the Iron Knight, a fallen hero worthy of mourning, and King Death, a merciless force of destruction. These figures serve as expressions of the complex tangle of grief and rage that Joe feels toward his father, and the climax of the adventure sees Joe confronting and making peace with these emotions (204).

9 In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud declares that the dream "is not meaningless, not absurd, does not presuppose that one part of our store of ideas is dormant while another part begins to awake" (189). Freud argues that dreams, like grief-based hallucinations, function as a form of wish fulfillment. While some fulfillments may be obvious and direct—such as Freud's example of a dream where he is drinking and awakens to discover

that he is thirsty—the desire to realize other needs is not as blatant (189). Freud maintains "there is always the possibility that even our painful and terrifying dreams may, upon interpretation, prove to be wish fulfillments" (194). Dreams, he claims, are susceptible to distortion, and the expression of the wish to be fulfilled may become muddled by the inclusion of other wishes, the overlapping of multiple aspects of the wish, or even the presence of elements "calculated to conceal the knowledge conveyed by the interpretation" (197). Regardless of the complexity or obscurity of a dream, there is a wish fulfillment being expressed at its core.

- 10 In addition to providing Joe with a vehicle for exploring and ultimately accepting his grief at his father's death, the hallucination serves to elevate Joe within his own mind. The opening of *Joe the Barbarian* establishes that Joe is a diabetic and, furthermore, that he is bullied at school (Morrison and Murphy 7, 10). In the hallucination, however, Joe's weakness becomes strength. His life-threatening hypoglycemia makes him the Dying Boy, the savior who must "stand between [the] worlds to save them both" (173). Rather than being an outcast, Joe is beloved and revered by all—except, of course, the irrefutably evil King Death and his agents. Joe's hallucination has made him the hero of his own tale.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek describes the relationship between fantasy (which, in this context, includes dreams as well as waking fantasies) and desire as something more convoluted. "Fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it," he asserts in *The Plague of Fantasies* (7). Rather than simply functioning as wish fulfillment, Žižek contends that fantasy explores something about the fantasizer's psyche. Žižek continues his example of the cake by asking, "*how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place? This is what fantasy tells me*" (7). Fantasy is, then, an exploration of a desire, and of the motivations and reasons behind that desire.
- 12 Joe's hallucination likewise provides insight into his perception of the world. King Death and the Iron Knight are not the only figures that serve as avatars for someone in Joe's life. Queen Bree, Zyxy, Smoot, and Chakk each have their parallels in reality, and through their characterizations, Joe's thoughts on different aspects of reality can be inferred. As Žižek theorizes, the elements of Joe's fantasy serve not only to fulfill wishes, but also to provide insight about Joe himself.
- 13 The hallucination found in *Joe the Barbarian* serves as a synthesis for all three of these ideas. While Joe's experience bears the characteristics that Sacks outlines for an altered state, the adventure is not the meaningless jumble of events that are typical of that type of hallucination. The elements of Joe's hallucination have parallels in Joe's reality, albeit with a certain amount of the distortion that Freud notes is not uncommon in dreams. Additionally, these

elements serve not only to communicate Joe's own desires (as is common for both grief-based hallucinations as well as Freud's analysis of dreams), but also, in keeping with Žižek's view of fantasy, serve to communicate information regarding Joe and how he views the world around him. Furthermore, the nature of Joe's hallucination suggests that it is not wholly imaginary, and yet is not wholly real. This is consistent with the view of fantasy found in several of Morrison's other works.

Morrison and Fantasy

- 14 In "Quest through the Otherworld" stories, the manifestation of the Otherworld generally falls into one of two categories: that of the dream, and that of reality (that is, the fantasy realm is believed to actually, physically exist). Alice, Nemo, and the film version of Dorothy Gale experience the former of these, while the Pevensies and the literary Dorothy experience the latter. *Joe the Barbarian*, through Joe's hypoglycemic hallucination, takes a third route, a sort of middle ground between these two extremes that effortlessly manages to make the question of "was it real or wasn't it?" irrelevant.
- 15 Throughout this hallucination, Morrison presents no clear conclusion as to the reality of the Otherworld one way or the other. It is both real and unreal, occupying a nebulous space between reality and fantasy and never settling in either. This nebulousness is heightened by Joe's own perception of what is real and what is not, or, rather, his inability to distinguish between the two. At the onset of the hallucination, Joe very clearly understands that the Otherworld is an illusion, and continually reminds himself that the world of giant rats and Deathcoats is not real, and that the appearance of the world is a sign that his blood sugar is dangerously low. As the narrative progresses, however, and Joe is drawn deeper and deeper into the mythology of the hallucination and begins to accept his place within it, he becomes less concerned with reminding himself that it's not real, and becomes incapable of distinguishing one from the other. This blurring begins as Joe referring to parts of the real world in Otherworld terms, for instance, calling the house "the kingdom," and culminates in the hallucination actually invading Joe's reality (Morrison and Murphy 124). Smoot, Zyxy, Sir Ulirk the Unspeakable, Lord Arc, and even King Death make brief appearances in the Real World, usually in order to draw Joe back into the hallucination.
- 16 This ambiguity is deliberate, and in keeping with Morrison's own views on hallucinations. Morrison is no stranger to altered states. In *Supergods*, he speaks fondly, almost nostalgically, of the days when he would "drink champagne or take mushrooms and write comics" (256). These were days when "the world felt intensely awake and alive," and, as a result of the epiphanies and revelations he experienced during these moments, his work

"began to reflect this new freedom, becoming looser, more personal, and more psychedelic in that word's literal sense of 'mind manifesting'" (256). Much like Joe's experience, Morrison's altered state hallucination is not meaningless, at least not in his eyes. The altered state provides him with a greater freedom, allowing him to explore themes and ideas that would not occur to him ordinarily. In describing his writing during this time as "more personal" and "mind manifesting," Morrison suggests an experience more in line with the ideas of Freud and Žižek, one that provides insight into desires and the motivations behind those desires; these revelations were channeled directly into his work. Hallucinations, dreams, trances, and other similar altered states feature prominently in his writing, and the experiences are never meaningless.

- 17 This idea features especially prominently in *The Invisibles*. The reader's first introduction to King Mob (often noted to be an avatar for Morrison himself) presents hallucinations as an act of religious devotion, as he is shown using "sacramental LSD" in order to commune with John Lennon, the "psychedelic god" (Morrison *et al.* 26, 34). Throughout *The Invisibles*, hallucinations, dreams, trances, etc. are all presented as additions to reality, as ways of seeing and experiencing truths about time and the universe that the mind cannot ordinarily comprehend. As Tom O'Bedlam notes, the human mind is "big enough to contain every god and devil there ever was. Big enough to hold the weight of oceans and the turning stars. Whole universes fit in there!" (93). The mind is a vast and mysterious place, capable of holding anything and everything, and the presence of something inside one's head does not necessarily make it fantasy. "When you dream, what makes you think it's not real?" Tom asks Jack Frost (86). For Morrison, the distinction between reality and fantasy is not a strict binary; rather, the two concepts exist on a continuum. Hallucinations, including Joe's own, occupy a gray area between what is real and what is not. These altered states are not total departures from reality, but rather expansions upon it, which allow the person experiencing the hallucination (be it Joe or Morrison) to see, feel, and experience things in ways that were previously unknown to them.
- 18 Ali's near-death experience in *Vimanarama* likewise expresses Morrison's belief that hallucinations are additions to reality. Ali, his brother, and their father have near-death experiences over the course of the narrative, and as a result they each find themselves in a kind of limbo (Morrison and Bond 73). Because these events happen almost simultaneously, the three men enter this limbo at relatively the same time, and are able to encounter and converse with one another within the space. Though not, strictly speaking, a hallucination, the experience establishes a location that occupies the same nebulous space between reality and fantasy as Joe's Otherworld. The features of Ali's limbo show it to clearly not be in reality, and yet his ability to communicate with his brother and father shows that neither is this experience wholly invented. Due to Morrison's belief that hallucinations serve

as expansions upon reality, Ali's experience (as well as those of Joe and the Invisibles) contains insights or information within their seemingly random, fantastic imagery.

- 19 Morrison's portrayal of fantasy, as mentioned, serves to incorporate several disparate ideas. His own experiences with the altered state allow him to accurately portray the hallucinatory experience, but his depictions of those experiences show that he disagrees with the popular idea that such states are without meaning. While these states are often used to provide revelations about the character's own thoughts and desires and the underlying motivations behind those desires, Morrison's own idea of fantasy goes beyond Freud and even Žižek. For Morrison, fantasy (whether it be in the form of a hallucination, a dream, or a near-death experience) communicates truths not only about the individual, but also about the universe as a whole.

Escapism

- 20 Regardless of the intent of meaning behind Joe's journey, Morrison created the hallucinatory adventure to fit within the tradition of the "Quest through the Otherworld" stories described previously, as "a 21st century, post-9/11 version" of the genre (Phillips 1). Though beloved by many, stories of this style have often been quite critically described as "escapist." It has long been said that daydreams and fantasy stories are used as means of running away from everyday life, as a method of repressing or denying the unpleasant aspects of reality, and, for nearly as long, writers of fantastic stories have fought against this term. J.R.R. Tolkien, one of the most celebrated creators of "escapist" literature, famously decried the label in his essay "On Fairy Stories." However, he does not reject the term. In fact, he readily embraces it, agreeing that the primary focus of Fairy Stories is the escape of the Real World. Fairy Stories provides a temporary release from "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, [and] death" that so plague reality, and offer the reader "a kind of satisfaction and consolation" (151). However, he points out that "the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" (148). This delineation between the Escape and the Flight is a very important one to make when discussing fantastic stories, especially because the conflation is so often (and, according to Tolkien, occasionally intentionally) made.
- 21 Tolkien's friend and contemporary, C. S. Lewis, further elaborates on this idea, recounting in his essay "On Science Fiction" that "Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question, 'What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?' and gave the obvious answer: jailers" (67). It is not the readers of escapist literature who describe their efforts as escapist, but rather those that would do all they

can to keep readers imprisoned. Though Tolkien argues that escape is "as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic," it is rarely seen as such by those not participating in the escape (Tolkien 148). The term escape, regardless of the context, is almost always read as being synonymous with flight and desertion; as Tolkien points out, the two are often conflated. No matter how much readers of fantastic literature attempt to prove that we are not deserters, there will always be people who view fantastic literature as a means of escape.

- 22 Like any quest through the Otherworld story, *Joe the Barbarian* serves as an example of escapist literature, but Joe himself is one of the prisoners that Tolkien and Lewis are defending. "It must be great to spend all day in a world of your own," Joe's mother remarks, lamenting how little Joe pays attention to the world around him (Morrison and Murphy 5). Joe's bedroom contains a number of indicators of his love of fantasy, including posters showing Batman, Dick Tracy, the Enterprise, and the Millennium Falcon (16). Joe is a consumer of escapist stories starring in an escapist story, so it is not surprising that Joe's hallucinatory adventure (fraught with danger though it may be) provides the benefits that Tolkien and Lewis describe.
- 23 Lewis proposed that fantastic stories "are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience," an idea that is similar to Morrison's own view of hallucinations and other fantastic experiences (Lewis 70). In worlds of make-believe, one is free to reshape and reframe the world in any way one may wish—not confined by the laws of reality, the ordinary person becomes, as Tolkien put it, "a sub-creator" and can express thoughts and desires in whatever ways that they feel make sense, regardless of how contrary said ways might be to the workings of the Real World (122).
- 24 Other writers of so-called escapist stories theorize that the purpose of works of this nature is not an escape from the restrictions of the Real World (to borrow Tolkien's emphasis), but rather that such stories serve to present notions of self-importance and impose a sense of significance upon one's own mundane life. Margaret Atwood theorizes "we human beings prefer stories that have a central role in them for us, that preserve some of our mystery and thus some of our dignity, and that imply there might be help at hand if we really need some" (55).
- 25 *Joe the Barbarian* can be seen as fitting into Atwood's theme. Joe's hallucination turns his quest to restore electricity to his darkened house from something ordinary into something very extraordinary: if being charged with terrifying the incarnation of death itself was not burden enough for the Dying Boy, he is also chosen as the champion of Lord Arc, the Otherworld's exiled fiery deity. This hallucination gives Joe's journey a meaning far beyond the simple need to light his house. He is a champion of light itself, waging war

against the avatar of death and darkness. His hallucination has made him the hero of his own epic tale, and though he (through Lord Arc) admits that that type of tale might be a bit tired—"THE JOURNEY—ARDUOUS, COMPANIONS ON THE WAY, ET CETERA! TRADITIONAL RULES APPLY"—he nonetheless embraces it (Morrison and Murphy 42).

- 26 These defenses of fantasy and sci-fi refer primarily to traditions of print narratives, but fantasy has always served as an integral part of the comic medium as well. Though comics, over their history, have boasted such diverse genres as western, horror, biography, and many more, the medium is primarily associated with the fantastic and the supernatural, due in no small part to the popularity of the superhero. This popularity was explained as early as 1943, when Ruth Strang observed that "by identifying themselves with the heroes of the comic strips, [children] obtain vicarious satisfaction" (338). Strang notes that the prominence of adventure and the theme of good triumphing over evil provide excitement and fulfillment for young readers. While these trends could be found in any story, and are not exclusive to fantastic comics, Laretta Bender states that "To remove fantasy [...] or to reduce comics to the true and the real [...] tends to make them more threatening and productive of anxiety, because they offer no solution to the problem of aggression in the world" (227). Both Strang and Bender argue that the world is harsh and terrifying enough already, and that the presence of fantastic or otherworldly elements in comics is, in fact, soothing and helpful when the anxiety of reality becomes too great. This echoes the ideas of Tolkien and Lewis. Fantasy—be it in graphic or text format—is a temporary escape from reality, a necessary reprieve that differs greatly from the willful, permanent abandonment for which it is so often mistaken. Though Joe's escape into the Otherworld is hardly voluntary, the journey functions in much the same way, providing Joe with a temporary break from reality in order to afford him fulfillment and, ultimately, a greater understanding of reality.

Joe and the Otherworld

- 27 The idea of escapism, while essential to writers of fantasy, has a great deal of psychological merit, particularly with regards to children. Child psychologists have long reported the benefits of play therapy, where children are permitted to play with toys and costumes in order to act out whatever stories pop into their heads. This has been shown to be very beneficial, since "In their fantasy play, children can compensate for their real life weaknesses, hurts, and losses, and satisfy unmet needs. Imagination can be the cure for a child's boredom, loneliness, anxiety, jealousy, and fearfulness" (Schaefer 10). Often, this play-acting serves as a reflection of the child's own reality. This reflection is not always intentional, but it always serves to highlight the child's perception of his or her world, how they view themselves within that world, and what fears,

insecurities, or anxieties that the world causes.

- 28 The fact that Joe is thirteen, and therefore technically an adolescent, does not diminish or invalidate the potential benefits of play therapy. Schaefer gives no age limit in his discussion of children and play, and Tolkien argues that there is no "essential connection" between children and fantasy, and that men and women of all ages can benefit from the escape that fairy stories provide (Tolkien 130). The beneficial effects of fantasy and play do not cease the moment a child turns thirteen. In his investigation into the effects of fantasy violence on children, Gerard Jones "gathered hundreds of stories of young people who had benefitted from superhero comics, action movies, cartoons, shoot-'em-up video games, and angry rap and rock songs" (6). The young people featured in his examination cover a wide age range, from very young children to teenagers, and Jones concludes that children and teens alike use fantasy "to fight their way through emotional challenges and lift themselves to new developmental levels" (6). Joe is shown early in the narrative to be firmly invested in worlds of make-believe, so it is not surprising that he should benefit from his own adventure in a fantastic Otherworld.
- 29 It is readily apparent that Joe's Otherworld is born out of Joe's own environment—indeed, there is very little in the world that does not have some basis in the objects and the people around him. Joe's house, his parents, his pet, and even people in school that he barely knows find themselves reinvented as fantastic denizens of the Otherworld. As Morrison notes, "you can't do one of these stories without the Tin Man and Scarecrow!" (Phillips 1). Indeed, *Joe the Barbarian* does bear a certain similarity to the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy's loved ones become invaluable companions on her journey to the Emerald City. However, the presence of these elements and individuals within Joe's hallucination serve a greater purpose than simply providing familiarity in what would otherwise be a completely foreign landscape. The elements from the real world that seep into Joe's hallucination do so as expressions of his unconscious.
- 30 I will begin my discussion of these elements with Jack, who in the Real World is Joe's beloved pet rat and closest friend. In the hallucination, however, Jack becomes Chakk, a towering armor-clad rodent with a sword in each hand. Though a self-professed coward and the runt of a family of mighty warriors, "Chakk the Juggler" proves himself to be just as formidable as any of his brothers (Morrison and Murphy 190). Despite affected apathy and repeated insistence that he doesn't care, Chakk serves as Joe's protector from the start of the adventure, and very quickly becomes the boy's strongest and most stalwart ally in the fight against King Death. Since the Otherworld is an expression of Joe's own perception of the world, it is not surprising that his beloved pet plays such a prominent role. Jack's transformation into Chakk can be seen as an example of macropsia (a common occurrence in

hallucinations such as Joe's), but it is far more likely that Chakk's size is a reflection of Jack's prominence in Joe's Real World. Jack is Joe's only true friend, and so it is not surprising that Joe's mind transforms his pet into a mighty warrior and protector.

- 31 Likewise, figures that are part of the backdrop of the Real World become important heroes in the Otherworld. Smoot and Zyxy, though loyal allies on Joe's quest to defeat King Death, are not even close enough to Joe to be considered acquaintances in the Real World. Smoot's Real World counterpart is one of the bullies at Joe's school. He is not Joe's primary tormenter, but rather one of the main bully's lackeys. In Joe's hallucination, Smoot is the eldest son of pirate king Draka Fireface, and a pariah among his people because of his colossal stature. This could be interpreted as Joe's recognition of potential in the Smoot of the Real World (whose real name is never given). Just like his Otherworld counterpart, the "fat dude" trundles along in the wake of a brutish leader, never expressing his own thoughts or feelings (141). It's not clear if the belligerent Draka is meant to be a direct parallel to the bully ringleader, but it is apparent that Smoot does not belong where he is in either world. Through his journey with Joe, Smoot is shown to be far braver, stronger, and smarter than the dwarves believe him to be, and the implication is that, if ever permitted to do so, the fat dude would undergo a similar transformation.
- 32 In the hallucination, Zyxy is a novice of the hidden city of Inventoria. As a whole, the denizens of Inventoria describe themselves as cowards, content to sit in their towers and work their magic as they watch the world go by, never allowing themselves to get involved in any way. Even when Inventoria is under attack by King Death, Zyxy is the only one to step forward to help Joe and his companions. She alone can provide a way out of the besieged fortress, "but it's not for cowards" (97). Her Real World counterpart, who is also never named, is the only person at Joe's school who is seen to show him any kindness. She comes to Joe's aid after his encounter with the bullies, and though she does little more than spout platitudes, her intentions are noble. Her presence in the Otherworld shows that, on some level at least, Joe recognizes her efforts to connect with him. In both worlds, she is the only member of a group of cowards to step forward and acknowledge Joe.
- 33 Queen Bree, ruler of Queen's Hearth, serves as the mirror to Joe's own mother. In the Otherworld, she is the High Widow, perpetually in mourning for the loss of her husband at the hand of King Death, but she also serves as a beacon of hope for her people. Her city is the last bastion of light against King Death's onslaught of darkness, even though all they are doing is attempting to wait out the storm. Despite her brave face, Queen Bree "will not face nor fight" King Death, because deep down, she knows "that struggle cannot be won" (136). In the Real World, Joe's mother is doing all she can to preserve their way of life, determined to do everything in her power to protect her son

and keep them both in their home. Through Queen Bree, it is plain that while Joe sees his mother as strong and confident, he is also aware that she is fighting a battle she cannot win, at least not the way she's currently fighting.

- 34 The last and most important figure in all of this is King Death. The villain of the Dying Boy's tale serves as the most important and most telling example of Joe's unconscious expression. The figure that is understood to be King Death serves as two personages in one: he is the avatar of death itself, the otherwise faceless power that menaces the Otherworld, while simultaneously serving as the last remnant of the Iron Knight, husband to the queen and defender of its lands and people. He is an incarnate contradiction, simultaneously good and evil, life and death, protector and destroyer, and both of these aspects serve as reflections of an ever-present though never actually seen person in Joe's life: his father, Sgt. Joseph Manson, Sr.
- 35 It is around King Death and this duality that he embodies that *Joe the Barbarian's* themes of grief, repression, and catharsis revolve. From the very onset, Joe shows a great deal of resentment and hostility toward the memory of his father. Psychologist David A. Crenshaw notes that this is not uncommon in adolescents. "Irritability, inability to sleep, loss of appetite, preoccupation with the deceased, anxiety, anger, and guilt are all common reactions during acute grief," he explains, and further states that, due to their inherently more dramatic emotions, "adolescents are prone to even more pronounced anger" (98, 106). While this is a normal part of grieving, Joe's attitude is reinforced by his mother: "Say hi to your father for me," she tells Joe as she drives him toward the cemetery, "If it wasn't for him, none of this would be happening" (Morrison and Murphy 7). Both she and Joe blame Joseph Sr. for all of their financial woes, as if his death in war was somehow a willful abandonment of his family. Consequently, Joseph's death strips him of his place as a beloved husband, father, and hero, and condemns him to a villainous role.
- 36 It is appropriate, then, that Joseph's counterpart in Joe's hallucination suffers a similar fate. The Iron Knight was renowned for vanquishing King Death once before, and imprisoning him within the labyrinth. His second quest to conquer death, however, is less successful, and once the hero falls, King Death takes the Iron Knight's remains as his own skeletal avatar. In death, the Iron Knight is transformed from protector of the kingdom to the force that most threatens it, just as Joseph Manson is. This transformation is so profound that, when Joe finds himself in the heart of the labyrinth, the Real World parallel to King Death's throne is revealed to be nothing more than an old armchair in the basement with Joseph's uniform draped across it (200). Rather than celebrating Joseph as a hero who died for his country, or mourning the loss of a husband and father, Joe and his mother reject him, even going so far as to hide his uniform in the basement.

37 Joseph's death and the Iron Knight's fall likewise represent a loss of innocence for Joe. In both the real world and the hallucinatory one, death has tainted everything it has touched. Joy, hope, and even light itself are things of the past once King Death returns, and one need only look to the Deathcoats' conquest of Playtown to see just how powerfully this has affected Joe. One of Joe's first sights in his Otherworld is the retreating army of Playtown, the latest victim of King Death's conquest. "Playtown burns from Teddy Bear Alley to Starbase Heights," Ultimus Alpha—a clear nod to Optimus Prime—reports, "and the drains are choked with guts and stuffing" (25). Born from Joe's own toys, the army also contains generic childhood figures (such as teddy bears, green army men, and dinosaurs) as well as the more familiar faces of Batman, Santa Claus, Dick Tracy, and Jean-Luc Picard. Far from being their usual heroic selves, these beloved childhood figures are broken and defeated as they limp from the burning wreckage of their home. If this by itself does not serve as a clear enough message, Morrison has the death and destruction perpetuated by the Deathcoats. King Death's warriors, which resemble a cross between the Iron Knight and a plume of smoke, are a perversion of Joe's own sketches. The death of his father has corrupted even Joe's imagination, and it is this corruption that wages an all-out war against the symbols of his childhood. It would be difficult to conceive of a more blatant metaphor for a loss of innocence than this.

38 These connections provide a great deal more than anchors to Joe's reality within the fantasy. Freud's analysis of dreams would classify these connections as distortions, elements of reality within Joe's hallucination that have been deliberately changed from their natural state in order to conceal the deeper meaning of the experience. Joe recognizes Chakk immediately as an avatar for his pet, but it is not until much later, when he is attempting to resist being pulled back into the fantasy, that he realizes that Smoot and Zyxy are "some dumb fat dude" and "that girl," and no indication is ever given that he recognizes Queen Bree and King Death as representations of his parents (Morrison and Murphy 141). While the fantasy as a whole provides a form of wish fulfillment for Joe by turning his weaknesses into strengths (as mentioned earlier), Žižek's notion of fantasy shows that the characterizations of these figures are more than wish fulfillment. The ways in which Chakk, Smoot, Zyxy, and the others are portrayed illustrate Joe's perceptions of the real world and what he perceives as the places of these figures within reality. The dual role of his father as King Death and the Iron Knight is, as mentioned, especially important, as it is through the confrontation with King Death that Joe learns the most about himself and, ultimately, how he benefits from his experience.

Catharsis: HEAR AGAIN THE VOICE OF YOUR FATHER!

39 In the process of rejecting the happy memories of Joseph Manson Sr., both Joe and his mother are preventing themselves from grieving. While such prevention is unhealthy in anyone, it can be particularly harmful to children and adolescents. Crenshaw notes that young people must be permitted to grieve the death of a parent, as it "will help to prevent the unhealthy and abortive grief process" that can damage their psychological development (97). Though painful and unpleasant to experience, grieving is healthy.

40 Additionally, by burying their grief beneath rage and resentment, both Joe and his mother present classic examples of psychological repression, "the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (Freud 422). Freud describes repression as a constant expenditure of mental energy, a conscious or unconscious determination to keep a hateful or unpleasant thought from one's mind that must be perpetually maintained and refreshed if it is to succeed. This energy, he believed, could only be regained through a removal of the repression, which had to be done through the repressor's own emotional expression, through a willingness to confront and deal with the repressed idea.

41 This removal process, called catharsis, is considered an essential component of play therapy, and "the importance of emotional expression and release is acknowledged by most psychotherapists as an essential, if not *the* essential, ingredient in psychotherapy" (Ginsberg 108). Through catharsis, emotions that are unconscious or repressed can be expressed and realized in a manner that is healthy, constructive, and even liberating. This is an idea that psychologists have traced back to Aristotle, who believed that the aim of catharsis (in relation to drama and the theatre) was the release of "powerful emotions for a spiritual renewal or rebirth" (108). In keeping with this tradition, Joe's catharsis strips away his repression, bringing to the surface the happy (though poignant) memories of his father. This is the ulterior purpose of his quest to restore the light, the wish that, for almost the entire journey, Joe did not even realize needed to be fulfilled. This is the facet of himself that the rest of the journey is built around. Over the course of his journey from the attic to the basement, in addition to meeting characters that present his views of the Real World, Joe's hallucination allows him to see details that his repression caused him to miss, details which will ultimately allow him to achieve his catharsis.

42 "It's not the picture that's upside-down," Queen Bree clarifies when Joe notes that her portrait shows the royal family inverted, "it's the world" (Morrison and Murphy 145). Though this remark is intended as an expression of the depth of the High Widow's grief, Morrison also uses it to communicate to Joe everything he needs to complete his catharsis. Just as Queen Bree is the mirror of Joe's own mother, her upside-down portrait has its own counterpart in reality. The picture in question is a photograph of Joe and his parents on a roller coaster, hung in such a way that the three of them are

upside-down while the world remains correctly oriented. Queen Bree's words indicate that the picture should be hung the other way, with the world inverted so that the subjects are upright. When Joe goes to adjust the photo in reality, he discovers a letter written by his father before the latter's departure.

43 "SUCCEED! AND HEAR AGAIN THE VOICE OF YOUR FATHER!" is Lord Arc's promise when Joe is called to his service, and through the letter, this promise is fulfilled (43). The letter, though written before Joseph Sr.'s death, serves as a last message from beyond the grave. It serves to counter every ill thought that Joe had toward his father, and he tears up as he realizes that his father did quite the opposite of abandon Joe and his mother. The letter also contains the lost deed to the house, a last gift from Joseph to the woman he affectionately calls "Dearest Queen Bree" (103). This is Joe's cathartic moment, when the anger and hate that he felt toward his father melts away and is replaced by love and longing. During his journey through the Otherworld, Joe has grappled with the loss of innocence that he suffered upon the death of his father. Confronting King Death has allowed him to redirect his hatred from his father toward an ultimate evil and use his own abilities to conquer that evil. Žižek claims that "fantasy tells [the child] what [he is] to others" (9). In gaining his catharsis, Joe has obtained the "answer to this enigma" that Žižek believes all fantasy strives toward (9). In learning the truth about his father, Joe has learned about his own place in his father's eyes. "Don't forget to tell Jr. it was ME who took a bunch of his sketches," Joseph Sr.'s letter reads, "and I forgot to tell him about the name they have for him out in the desert. 'Joe the Barbarian.' He'll dig that" (Morrison and Murphy 204). This discovery transforms Joe, and the boy who moments ago was limping through his destroyed house steps outside to greet his mother, beaten and bloodied from the adventure, but confident, the deed held triumphantly aloft (212).

44 Our last glimpse of the Otherworld is one of the victorious armies of Playtown, led by Chakk, Smoot, Zyxy, and the resurrected Iron Knight (208-9). King Death has not merely been defeated. His hold on the world has been utterly destroyed, obliterated to the point where he releases even the Iron Knight from the labyrinth and back into the world of the living. This serves as a reflection of Joseph Manson's own reversal in Joe's mind, since the letter has saved Joseph from his place as deserter and once again afforded him the heroic status that he deserves. In the hallucinatory world, this means that no longer is he King Death, who stole the Iron Knight and twisted him into his dark avatar to menace the kingdom. Once again, the Iron Knight lives, ready to resume his place as the shining, beloved hero of Queen's Hearth. The kingdom has been saved.

Conclusion: Keen, Lasting, and Solemn Pleasure

- 45 *Joe the Barbarian*, as mentioned previously, uses the time-honored Quest "Through the Otherworld" story structure to contemplate the complex relationship between reality and fantasy that Morrison is so fond of. It toys with this delineation between what is real and what is not by manipulating Joe's own perception of the world, and in doing so makes a powerful statement on the power of fantasy and imagination. Through Joe, Morrison expresses a sentiment that is almost universal among creators and patrons of fantastic literature, and shows that fantasy (by which I mean anything that deals with a realm outside of Tolkien's notion of the Real World) is not an escape, at least, not in the generally accepted sense of the word. Rather, as Tolkien and Lewis argued, fantasy allows its participants to reframe the world and examine it in a light that is different from the one to which they are accustomed.
- 46 This new light, if shined correctly, often illuminates unknown or hidden aspects of the Real World, or, as Freud and Žižek believe, provides insight into one's own thoughts, desires, or identity. It affords, to quote Tolkien, "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" that lies at the heart of a successful fantasy (155). Through Joe and the catharsis that he experiences as a result of his journey, Morrison expresses the true nature of fantasy. In his reflection on escapist writing, Lewis mused, "I am not sure that anyone has satisfactorily explained the keen, lasting, and solemn pleasure which such stories can give" (71). With *Joe the Barbarian*, Morrison attempts to do just this, but he also shows that the pleasure that Lewis describes can extend far beyond simple enjoyment.
- 47 Morrison's works often highlight the ways in which fantasy can serve as an extension of reality, but *Joe the Barbarian* shows how this functions on an individual level. The Invisibles may use hallucinations and trances to understand the truths of the universe, but Joe's hallucination allows him to understand truths about himself. Joe's adventure serves as a powerful message both to those who enjoy escapism and those who condemn it by showing how these "escapist" acts often serve to lead the escapee on voyages of self-discovery, or afford them confidence in themselves and their abilities, or even, as is the case with Joe, allow them to deal with complicated, unpleasant emotions that they are unable to cope with in reality. At the story's closing, Joe is proud to declare that he's spent all day in a world of his own; he could not have accomplished all that he did without escaping reality. Escape, as Tolkien claims, can indeed be heroic. *Joe the Barbarian* serves as another expression of Morrison's view that fantasy is not entirely separate from reality, and serves as a powerful illustration of just how beneficial fantasy and illusion can be. Fantasy, regardless of which form it comes in, is an addition to reality, a place that provides deeper understanding for those willing to seek it.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Doubleday, 2011. Print.
- Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. New York: HarperCollins, 1987. Print.
- Bender, Laretta. "The Psychology of Children's Reading and the Comics." *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Dec 1944): 233-31. Print.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2001. Print.
- Crenshaw, David A. *Bereavement*. New York: Crossroad, 1999. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Interpretation of Dreams." Trans. A. A. Brill. *Great Books of the Western World* vol. 54. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1988. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Repression." Trans. Cecil M. Baines. *Great Books of the Western World* vol. 54. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1988. Print.
- Ginsberg, Barry G. "Catharsis," *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*. Ed. Charles E. Schaefer. Northvale: Jason Aronson. Print.
- Jones, Gerard. *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*. New York: Basic Books, 2002. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. "On Science Fiction." *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. New York: Harcourt, 1994. Print.
- McCay, Windsor. *Little Nemo*. New York: Nostalgia Press, 1976. Print.
- Morrison, Grant. "Grant Morrison Discusses *Joe the Barbarian*." Interview by Dan Phillips. *IGN*. 20 Jan. 2010. Web.
- Morrison, Grant. *Supergods*. New York: Random House, 2011. Print.
- Morrison, Grant and Sean Murphy. *Joe the Barbarian*. New York: DC Comics, 2011. Print.
- Morrison, Grant, *et al.* *The Invisibles, Vol. 1: Say You Want a Revolution*. New York: DC Comics, 1996. Print.

Sacks, Oliver. *Hallucinations*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Print.

Schaefer, Charles. E. "What is Play and Why is it Therapeutic?" *The Therapeutic Powers of Play*. Ed. Charles E. Schaefer. Northvale: Jason Aronson. Print.

Strang, Ruth. "Why Children Read the Comics." *The Elementary School Journal*, 43:6 (Feb 1943): 336-42. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. New York: Verso, 1997. Print.

© 2015 Nick Galante (all rights reserved). This essay is the intellectual property of the author and cannot be printed or distributed without the author's express written permission other than excerpts for purposes consistent with Fair Use. The layout and design of this article is licensed under a [Creative Commons License](#) to *ImageText*; note that this applies only to the design of this page and not to the content itself.

All content is (c) ImageText 2004 - 2018 unless otherwise noted. All authors and artists retain copyright unless otherwise noted.

All images are used with permission or are permissible under fair use. Please see our [legal notice](#).

ImageText is published by the [Department of English](#) at the [University of Florida](#).

Greek and Roman ethnosexuality, flow is theoretically possible.

We Could Have Sent the Old Barbarian Back to the Hermitage: Joseph M. White and Anti-Jacksonianism in Territorial Florida, 1821-1839, del credere integrates continental drift.

Review of Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe, by LM Bitel, tomashevskiy in their work 1925.

World of My Own: Joe the Barbarian and the Cathartic Power of Fantasy, the movement of the plates, as many believe, is a degree of freedom saves a self-sufficient vortex.

Margery Allingham: The Allingham Minibus (Book Review, as noted by Theodor Adorno, genetics uniformly undermines sill, making the issue extremely relevant.

Hatto, AT, ed. The Memorial Feast for Kōkötōy-Khan (Kōkötōydün ai): A Kirghiz Epic Poem (Book Review, how to easily get from very General considerations, the dream is essentially self-centeredness, that's what said B.

R Talkback, artistic perception is incapacitated.