GOD IN THE GUTTER:
EXPLORING RELIGIOUS DOUBT THROUGH
THE EMOTIONS OF COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS

by

JAMES M. LEVY

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ABSTRACT

Comic creators Mike Mignola, Neil Gaiman, and Miyazaki Hayao focus on intimate, reflective emotion to show religion as an internal struggle. Imagery styles blending sacred and playful elements encourage engagement with fraught spiritual questions from which their readers may have been buffered in previous encounters with religion. Here, there are no buffers to deflect frank questioning. The comics offer liberating spaces for contemplating and imagining a personally meaningful, portable spirituality that addresses uncertainty, fluidity, and change in people’s lives. The characters’ emotions draw spiritual seekers into unsettling internal explorations, all based on the conviction that doubt is not only an inevitable aspect of spiritual formation, but it is a patently desirable component. The artists stimulate affective interaction by zooming in on faces to a proximity from which the reader cannot turn away. The drawings minimize or eliminate surrounding details so that the reader’s eye concentrates its attention on subtle glances and grins, or expressive body language. Additionally, the artists play with internal and external voicing, blending their characters’ use of speech and thought bubbles in ways that manipulate consciousness and create palpable sensations of contact with the divine. These transcendent moments look different in each of the three authors’ treatments of their characters’ internal struggles: Mignola focuses on a gentle, tortured man beneath the demonic exterior of Hellboy, who is trying to live morally while under a curse of great evil. Gaiman charts the internal anguish of angels who find themselves caught in a spiritual pickle between what they know to be right and just, and the apparent divine stance on the same matters. Miyazaki illustrates the inner turbulence of a salvific figure, Nausicaā, as she strives to embrace the humanness of suffering without causing more suffering for others. In each case, the author shows religion as an internal struggle being glimpsed through the window of emotion.
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INTRODUCTION

Comic creators Mike Mignola, Neil Gaiman, and Miyazaki Hayao focus on intimate, reflective emotion to show religion as an internal struggle. Imagery styles blending sacred and playful elements encourage an engagement with fraught spiritual questions from which their readers may have been buffered in previous encounters with religion. Here, there are no buffers to deflect frank questioning. The comics offer liberating spaces for contemplating and imagining a personally meaningful, portable spirituality that addresses uncertainty, fluidity, and change in people’s lives. The characters’ emotions draw spiritual seekers into unsettling internal explorations, all based on the conviction that doubt is not only an inevitable aspect of spiritual formation, but it is a patently desirable component. The artists stimulate affective interaction by zooming in on faces to a proximity from which the reader cannot turn away. The drawings minimize or eliminate surrounding details so that the reader’s eye concentrates its attention on subtle glances and grins, or expressive body language. Additionally, the artists play with internal and external voicing, blending their characters’ use of speech and thought bubbles in ways that manipulate consciousness and create palpable sensations of contact with the divine. These transcendent moments look different in each of the three authors’ treatments of their characters’ internal struggles: Mignola focuses on a gentle, tortured man beneath the demonic exterior of Hellboy, who is trying to live morally while under a curse of great evil. Gaiman charts the internal anguish of angels who find themselves caught in a spiritual pickle between what they know to be right and just, and the apparent divine stance on the same matters. Miyazaki illustrates the inner turbulence of a salvific figure, Nausicaä, as she strives to embrace the humanness of suffering without causing more suffering for others. In each case, the author shows religion as an internal struggle being glimpsed through the window of emotion.

To introduce my exploration of these struggles, I posit that comics and manga (the Japanese sequential-art form roughly equivalent to American comic books) are flexible, playful media that make the interstices between human and divine spheres visible. Using imagery to bolster that statement, I will begin with Harry, an old Jewish fiddle-playing New Yorker who dies wearing the symbols of his religion and the doubts of his heart. Comic creator Neil Gaiman and artists Malcolm Jones III and Mike
Dringenberg bring the sweet, touching earthiness of Harry’s doubts alive in the death scene of *The Sound of Her Wings* (*Figure 1*). Brief analysis of the vignette will show that this fiddler touches heaven through the fragile patches in his beliefs. In turn, his story introduces the manner by which comics use affect to depict religion as an inner struggle that is enriched, not weakened by doubt.

*Fig. 1:* Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III. “The Sound of Her Wings,” in *The Sandman Vol 1: Preludes and Nocturnes.* (New York: DC Comics, © 2010 by DC Comics). [Chapter 8; p. 14].
In the comic, Harry is visited by a tall shadowy man named Dream and his sister Death, a 1980s Joan Jett lookalike in a black camisole and ankh necklace. Harry immediately asks that Death delay her business a moment. His voice grows firm as he recites the Shema Yisrael, and the comic’s perspective moves close to Harry’s wrinkled, stubbly face and closed eyes. Then his speech bubble feebly pops against a solid black background, and he is dead, causing the perspective to move overhead, distancing us from a body that no longer holds a soul. Outwardly, his yarmulke and this declaration of faith seem to have secured him a straight path to his Maker, but inwardly he remains uncertain. Harry’s soul, separated now from the dead body, whispers his feelings to Death. I wish to pause here to note that this dual presence of Harry—a ‘bodily self’ on the sofa and his identical ‘soul self’ standing across the room next to Death and Dream—illustrates how elegantly space, time, and matter can be manipulated in comics to visually express spiritual meaning. The arrangement of figures in this death-room panel reveals the onion-like nature of human thought, whereby we easily maintain consciousness of multiple layers of reality simultaneously. Thus, when we look now at the second, animated version of Harry as he stands next to Death, we sense that he is sharply aware of existing in an enchanted moment. The old living room wall behind his corpse has suddenly cracked. A painting reminiscent of Matisse’s *La Danse* seems to leap exuberantly across the resulting fissure, suggesting that a gap has opened between spiritual planes. Is it a path to the divine, unlocked by virtue of the dying man’s recitation of the Shema Yisrael? Harry confesses to Death that he does not know where he is headed, and that he simply said the prayer as a nostalgic tribute to his own father, who taught Harry that “the Sh’ma…guaranteed you a place in heaven. If you believe in heaven.” Harry believed in and loved his father, but he does not know whether he believes in heaven. He has doubts.

Significantly, Harry does not fear these doubts. Rather, they spark his religious curiosity. The artists show him relaxed, speaking in an earnest but chummy way with Death as he asks, “So. I’m dead. Now what?” His openness to possibility suggests that despite Harry’s identification with the dress code

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1 Ancient Egyptians used the ankh as a symbol of life, making it a provocative choice for Death’s jewelry.
2 The *Shema Yisrael*, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, is the most fundamental expression of Jewish monotheistic belief, and is traditionally recited as a person’s final words before death.
and prayer vocabulary of an institutionalized religion, Gaiman is using him to show a broader concept of spirituality, one which evangelical philosopher of religion Harold Netland defines as the avoidance of cold formalism and the favoring of “flexibility and creativity; tolerance and respect for alternative insights from all peoples and cultures; room for doubt and searching; and an emphasis upon personal experience.”

Two of these characteristics of open spirituality, ‘room for doubt’ and ‘room for searching,’ are especially fruitful concepts to consider in exploring the religious space that opens up in the comics. I will expand briefly here on an interesting contemporary approach to religious doubt, then consider how Harry expresses his own doubts. After that, I will touch upon spiritual searching or seeking, and finally move to applying these ideas to the works by Mignola, Gaiman, and Miyazaki that comprise the body of my thesis.

Religious doubt, an integral part of believing, receives short shrift in America. Instead of embracing it as a resource for deeper spiritual insights and growth, society casts the concept of doubt in a negative light by reflexively equating it with unbelief. Although religion now plays a markedly diminished role in public life compared to early in the previous century, American culture remains conditioned to conflate lack of religiosity with a lack of morals, and to therefore treat religious uncertainty as a sign of ethical weakness. Organized religions respond to doubt as a destabilizing power and a form of rejection that they must actively suppress. Researchers Geraldo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, in a study of Emerging Church Movements (ECMs), report that people gravitate to these new communities as havens from stifling environments where “Churches protect people from the trauma of doubt. Ministers


shield people with their sermons of certainty...Worship leaders believe on [the congregants’] behalf.”

The study’s ECM participants who fled this conventional church atmosphere explain that they have no wish to be relieved of the burden of doubt or insulated from feeling its intensity. They do not want to be protected. They perceive doubt as a rich, creative force to be explored and nurtured within themselves. They maintain that doubt is undeniably a struggle, but it is their struggle, and they want to be positively acknowledged when they talk about it.

Keeping in mind this receptive attitude toward uncertainty, we can return to The Sound of Her Wings and recognize a gentle acceptance of doubt. Harry talks simply about inner religious struggles in which he recognizes very little as being certain other than his love for his father. He is grateful when Death lingers to share his unsureness about the existence of heaven. He does not, however, ask her to protect him from those thoughts, because his doubts do not traumatize him in any way. They are manifestations of his curiosity and hopefulness, not signs of weakness or failure. His doubts are integral to his inner spiritual life and he seems energized by them, given the way that the artists show his soul springing up and moving about the room with renewed vitality. Harry’s soul looks back at his corpse and muses at its appearance of age and emptiness. He no longer identifies with that earthly stage in his spiritual development; he is ready to move on and discover what Death is referring to when she tells him, “Now’s when you find out, Harry.” Readers never discover what Harry finds out, because the scene shifts to Death’s brother Dream, who conveys through blackened thought bubbles that, “From the darkness I hear the beating of mighty wings” (Figure 2). Dream’s head is turned away, and the loosely-hatched borders of his body blend with the shadow of an enormous wing on the wall behind, as though he is being blurred into something much larger than himself. Dream’s shapeless body, hidden hands, completely-shaded eyes and mouth, and his use of thought—or perhaps prayer—instead of speech add to a moment of transcendence. He keeps his eyes averted from the source of the wing shadow, giving us no indication of whether it is a bird, angel, demon, or Death herself who flies away with Harry. The image is a spectral

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shadow, devoid of substance, but it feels like a brush with something sacred. With its passing, there is no further sound of Harry; the moment passes, and we no longer touch the old fiddler’s inner spirit.

At this panel I will to pause to discuss another feature of the comics medium that lends itself well to visual expressions of religious meaning: Gutters. The concept will be referred to more extensively in the following chapters, so now is an appropriate time to define it. Comic artists face a huge challenge in trying to depict the movement of time and space through static pictures. Each little drawing on a comic book page is separated by a narrow space known as the “gutter,” which must be mentally leapt over to keep the narrative progressing. Comics scholar Scott McCloud considers this void, or gutter, to be one of the most artistically rich aspects of the medium. For instance, a dagger in a comic’s first panel, and a bleeding body in the second, require a reader to do the stabbing in his or her own mind while passing through the gutter. McCloud describes the reader’s role in such a case as that of an “in-betweener,” when he writes, “Comics ask the mind to work as a sort of in-betweener—filling in the gaps between panels as

Fig. 2: Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III. “The Sound of Her Wings,” in *The Sandman Vol 1: Preludes and Nocturnes.* (New York: DC Comics, © 2010 by DC Comics). [Chapter 8; p. 15].

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an animator might.” In this manner, comic artists rely on unknown audiences to inject their creations with life. The drawing of Dream in the dark shadow of a wing (refer back to Figure 2, above) is the end of the story of Harry, but it does not contain the old man’s likeness to give the reader closure. Where has he gone? Something happened to Harry while we crossed the line that separates the moment when Death comments, “Now’s when we find out, Harry” (Figure 1, above), from the moment when Dream hears the sound of wings. The medium itself is forcing readers to participate in sending Harry’s soul away, and in deciding the internal question of whether a belief in heaven might have been warranted.

Harry clearly dies in doubt about the afterlife, but he escapes most of the internal struggling that the reader endures for him. Harry looks at ease right up until he vanishes. His readiness to acknowledge doubt and move on toward spiritual maturation brings us to the second aspect of spirituality that Harold Netland emphasizes: ‘room for searching.’ Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton University professor specializing in the sociology of religion, sees a profound shift in American religious culture since the mid-twentieth century, with an emphasis on moving from what he terms a ‘dwelling spirituality’ to a ‘seeker spirituality.’ A dwelling spirituality encounters the sacred in a set place with “sharp symbolic boundaries”, such as a temple or church, around which believers settle in order to stay physically closer to God. In contrast, Wuthnow considers a seeking spirituality to be “tabernacle religion,” a portable, self-negotiated, inward-looking quest for security that is not dependent upon either a geographical or a symbolic place. This is a pilgrim faith, kindled by glimpses of the divine within everyday life experiences, and strengthened by self-knowledge.

The religious spaces that Mignola, Gaiman, and Miyazaki open up in their comics offer room for this type of unconstrained seeking and questioning. I will make close readings of their work in the following chapters to explore each artist’s approach to depicting religion as an inner struggle that is enriched, not weakened by doubt.

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7 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 88.
9 Wuthnow, After Heaven, 4.
CHAPTER 1: INTERNAL STRUGGLES WITH EVIL IN *HELLBOY*

Comics stimulate emotional engagement,\(^{10}\) opening readers to connect with the internal struggles of poignant characters. Mike Mignola’s comic series *Hellboy* uses an emotionally engaging protagonist burdened with a grotesque devil-like body, to draw readers into contemplations of the nature and locus of evil. This character, Hellboy, is compelling because although he has supernatural abilities with which to defeat external demons that attack him, he has only the strength of a human heart for facing his inner spiritual torments. Those torments are formidable. He wrestles with his own fearsome capacity for destruction, overwhelming levels of temptation, and an evil pedigree that appears nearly impossible to escape. The choices that he makes in trying to control his destiny through this spiritual minefield reflect his desire to honestly question who he really is and how he will lead his life.

Mignola and his colorist Dave Stewart, plus additional collaborating artists, use the artistic flexibility of the comics medium to represent Hellboy’s religious journey on two levels, one external and the other internal. First, they populate Hellboy’s real life with flesh-and-blood monsters, which he fights in his role as a government defense agency professional. These are his external demons. By incorporating the bold colors and super-human morphological styles of traditional American comic book heroes and villains, the pictures induce an exciting feeling that Hellboy’s spiritual quest is a grand, life-or-death physical crusade. The strong colors and physiques (Hellboy is a hulking seven-foot creature with fiery red skin) supply outer manifestations of the character’s inner strength. This leads to the second level of representation, in which Mignola makes those inner strengths tangible and emotionally resonant to readers by presenting them through dreams, visions, and other manipulations of time and place. He creates visible expressions of how Hellboy tackles spiritual confusion and uncertainty. By juxtaposing scenes of frenzied external action with introspective subconscious journeys, Mignola produces a penetrating view of the battle between evil and virtue that is going on inside Hellboy. Mignola’s stirring

use of colorful action to blend the reality and dream components of Hellboy’s spiritual exploration produces a passionate and moving expression of religion as an internal struggle.

Hellboy’s struggle is particularly agonizing to him because his outer mask and inner soul are such radical opposites. Often the burden of living in an evil mask is so great that Hellboy tries to hide from his own reality. Mignola does not allow the reader to escape so easily, though. He fills his panels with Hellboy’s monstrous face, forcing it so close that we can count individual whiskers (Figure 3).

Fig. 3: Mike Mignola, Dave Stewart, and Pat Brosseau. Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2000 by Mike Mignola). [Ch. 3: p. 2 of “Box Full of Evil” Epilogue, panels 6-7].

Hellboy sets his jaw against the raw emotion bubbling inside. With a bowed head and shadowed features, he insists, “I never deal with what I am… I don’t think about that.” Yet the reader sees clearly that indeed Hellboy always thinks about “What I am,” struggling constantly with doubt over his internal nature.
Mignola shapes his explorations around the Christian convention of tangibly embodying evil in devils. Hellboy is a half-demon from the underworld. He avoids attracting attention to his cursed origins, but readers quickly learn through the ancient fairy queen Mab that he was born in hell as the son of a high-ranking demon named Azzael. Mab’s creased old face grows grim as she stands in deeps shadows recounting the story (Figure 4, bottom left panel). She explains that Hellboy was initially “Delivered into hell,” where Azzael, “a Prince of Sheol,” had taken Hellboy’s human mother Sarah Hughes.

Fig. 4: Mike Mignola, Dave Stewart, and Clem Robins. Hellboy: Strange Places. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2006 by Mike Mignola). [Epilogue to Chapter 2: “The Island,” panels 4-8 on page 3].

Sarah is a witch. On her deathbed she rejects Satan and the bonds she once forged in hell to strengthen her magical powers. She huddles under steely blue shroud-like bedclothes, clutching a crucifix and a candle to repel the encroaching black void. She mutters prayers of repentance for “all the sins of my former life;” but the artwork casts doubt on the sincerity of her plea: only Sarah’s hands, neck, and half of her face appear, as though she has already given most of her body to a hell whose magic she still craves. The small crucifix, readily discerned as a symbol of salvation, looks impotent here in that it picks up no light from the flame burning only inches away from it. A sense that Sarah is destined for an eternity of guilt and punishment gains visual amplification from the violent reds, oranges, yellows, and blacks of the adjacent panels. Azzael looms enormous at the upper left, sporting massive horns and a coiled serpent-like occult insignia, as he thrusts out his fist ominously from amid hell’s fires. A blood-red panel at the upper right shows the barbed chains that Azzael uses to drag Sarah to hell. They lie on the ground where he flings them after removing the hooked ends from her flesh, illustrating that the impossibility of escape after arrival in the underworld makes physical restraints redundant. Below the chains, the squatting tailed creature is baby Hellboy, behind whom a tall haloed being turns away in disgust, her outstretched hand rejecting the beast. Hellboy sits alone in a blaze of fresh yellow flame that reflects the only other yellow on the page—Sarah’s sputtering taper. This subtle visual connection through color suggests that Sarah’s spiritual infidelity—the abandonment of her Christian religion’s salvific “Light of Christ” in favor of the flames of hell that she embraced as a witch—has spawned a menacing new blaze, a new devil. The scope of this horror is not confined to hell: Mab’s grave lips disclose that Hellboy was also “born again on earth.” The insinuation is that evil spreads uncontrollably as a consequence of consorting with devils. Mab’s somber recitation of the fiery tale intensifies a feeling of doom.

Before moving on to Hellboy himself, we will consider why Mignola portrays the child’s mother as suddenly being repentant at her death. Sarah’s power-greedy nature does not make her a convincing role model for positive internal religious struggles. The image of being deserving of sympathy quickly fades. Perhaps Sarah recognizes the wickedness within her, but she does not struggle against it or denounce it. Instead, she pretends to be the demon Azzael’s hapless victim, thereby avoiding taking
responsibility for her own spiritual maturation. As such, she functions as a foil for Hellboy’s very conscientious efforts to confront and deal with evil inside himself. Sarah’s spiritual pursuit is corrupt and her deathbed appeal for salvation is a sham. The crucifix that she holds limply in her left hand seems ready to tumble from her open fingers, as though she privately considers it a meaningless symbol placed only for show. In contrast, her right fist firmly clutches the burning candle in a manner suggesting that fire—the fire of hell—is her true savior. She has apparently cultivated no personal relationship with God, since she only refers to him in the third person, muttering “[I] pray God forgive me,” instead of speaking to Him directly with her entreaty. She has spent her life seeking connections with devils, and now at death she has no genuine intention of loosening her grip on that evil. A brief episode in Mignola’s comic *Hellboy: The Chained Coffin* [not shown] reveals in greater detail what really happens as Sarah’s life ebbs away. Azzael, hearing her plea for God’s forgiveness, comes to seduce her dying spirit back to hell. She listens fawningly to his sweet-talk about how beautiful she was as a 16-year-old when he impregnated her. She does not yet know all of Azzael’s evil (he will torture newborn Hellboy by chopping off his hand and shoving a sinister stone contraption into the bloody socket), yet she is aware that Azzael murdered two of her human children. She recognizes that he is despicable. Yet instead of reiterating her deathbed rejection of the fiend, Sarah begs him, “Can you make me that girl again?” and, upon his affirmative reply, utters, “Then I believe in you only [although] you’ve slaughtered my children.” Sarah is not repentant. Her mumbled prayers are just an opportunistic ploy for getting what she imagines will be power and adulation in hell. Mignola is using her to show that it takes more than the window-dressing of candles, crucifixes, and rote prayers to nurture an internal spiritual life. Sarah’s entire spiritual focus is on her desire for demonic power at any cost. She has sacrificed her humanness to that yearning, with no concern for what its evil does to her. Mignola thus establishes her as a contrast to the self-reflective way that Hellboy will question, explore, and challenge the conflicting human and demon halves of his identity.

As Mignola proceeds to flesh out Hellboy’s personality, it becomes evident that the character is

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highly attuned to his developing religious inner self. Gradually he comes to terms with his own reality, which includes the undeniable internal presence of evil. Interestingly, although Hellboy plainly looks like a devil on the outside, it is the fact that he sometimes feels like a devil on the inside that unnerves him most. Scholars have described this type of turning inward in the contemplation of evil as a distinctly American religious phenomenon. French historian Robert Muchembled writes in *The History of the Devil: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, that the incarnation of evil as an external entity identified as ‘Satan’ reached its apex in Europe in the late Middle Ages. It was a socially beneficial belief because the often-hysterical levels of fear provoked by an external devil created individual guilt and fear, which in turn lead to a strict moral order that streamlined collective development. However, as science, the Enlightenment, and industrialization broadened people’s ideas about human nature, the locus of evil gradually moved inward. Christians developed a progressively more internalized concept of the devil, until belief in his physical existence nearly vanished, “leaving men to accuse themselves.” Anxiety about such a close association with evil then metamorphosed in distinctly differing ways on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, unease over the continuing presence of evil in an increasingly secular culture was downplayed by recasting supernatural characters like the devil as “simply an object of ridicule, a curiosity, a superstition” that could be trivialized, earning laughter rather than concern. By contrast, the American response to decreased belief in an external Satan has been to actively claim and internalize the struggle with evil, by embracing an anxiety-based idea of personal demons that must be controlled. Such inner monsters are characterized by a distrust of oneself and one’s desires. This psychological shift in American religious sentiment was underway even before Sigmund Freud began studying the unconscious in Vienna in the late nineteenth century. By the mid-1800s, people already were experiencing a growing awareness of their inner emotional lives, their capacity for darkness, and the

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uncertain lines between good and bad, or between reality and mystery. Muchembled describes personal control of these internal religious dilemmas and anxieties as a perversely appealing challenge to an American society that “provides only a precarious bulwark against the beast dormant within: violence emanates from the very heart of the subject, who is constantly oscillating between savagery and civility.” We are the enemy whom we fear. Vestiges of religious Puritanism remain in our culture, saddling Americans with a heightened concern for individual responsibility that embraces this inward obsession. Thus, guilt over harboring the devil within plagues us and bleeds into the general culture.

Hellboy fits well with this American emphasis on internal religious struggles. Whereas Sarah Hughes merely feels evil within her when she lusts after Azzael’s magical powers, but takes no responsibility for it, Mignola presents Hellboy as actively recognizing and battling with his demons. He takes full responsibility for a very personal and complex struggle with evil, supporting Muchembled’s theory of a cultural anxiety that has moved inward.

Hellboy’s loathsome exterior, juxtaposed against his sweet heart, exemplify the tension in struggling to subdue an internal devil. Hellboy spends his childhood on earth, seeking spiritual cleansing by staying physically removed from his demonic origins in hell. Perhaps some purification is indeed occurring, since humans around him seem not to notice his red tail or grotesquely enlarged right hand. The hand portends what could happen if the hellish side of his parentage conquers the human half: ancient lore prophesizes that the hand’s bearer is destined to kill Satan, become the Beast of the Apocalypse, and reign in hell forever. That would be a hideous fate, but in Mignola’s brief comic Pancakes, a very young Hellboy is still blissfully unaware of any such taint or predisposition within himself. Instead, the story shows the little monster’s relaxed ease and sweetness as he plays with his dog Mac in the cheerful New Mexico sunshine (Figure 5). The boy exudes an innate goodness. When Hellboy is called to breakfast, he announces that he wants to eat noodles, but learns that he will be having something new today—

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pancakes. He makes a normal toddler’s fuss in resistance to the menu change, but soon relents and discovers that he *loves* pancakes (Figure 6). Hellboy grins widely as dashed lines of excitement leap

![Image](image1.png)

**Fig. 5:** Mike Mignola, Dave Stewart, and Pat Brosseau *Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2000 by Mike Mignola). [Chapter 1: “Pancakes,” panel 3 on page 1].

![Image](image2.png)

**Fig. 6:** Mike Mignola, Dave Stewart, and Pat Brosseau. *Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2000 by Mike Mignola). [Chapter 1: “Pancakes,” panels 1-3 on page 2].
from his face, accentuating the child’s uninhibited delight and causing readers to overlook any hint of evil from his horns or devil-red-hued skin. At this moment Hellboy is purely human, immersed in innocent enjoyment of his food’s warm buttery goodness. This capacity for tender visceral pleasure enrages the swarms of fiends in hell. Hellboy shouts “I love it!” and all of hell leaps up in anguish, frightened that his openness to simple human delights will threaten evil’s power over him. The sunny blue sky behind smiling Hellboy contrasts with dark shadows and sulfurous fumes in the underworld’s capital city of Pandemonium. Hellboy’s speech bubble boldly overlaps part of Pandemonium, as though casually trespassing to dilute hell’s power. Visually, joy is encroaching upon evil. In Hellboy’s struggle against his bad side, his good side has scored a win. In response to this joy, crowds of demons riot against a background of fire, each of them just a harsh silhouette of claws and horns. The conclusion of the story [not shown] explains that the fiends feel threatened by the pureness of Hellboy’s ability to derive human pleasure from a pancake. They insist that he belongs in hell and must return, but Hellboy’s innocent goodness weakens their evil influences. He is too free for them, too open to trying new paths, too curious about exercising free will for their comfort. They fear he will question his evil destiny. When he is older Hellboy will indeed entertain such questions, but in this vignette, he is convinced the struggle is over.

Of course, Hellboy would not be a gripping comic series if his personality remained so simple, so Mignola shows hints of an evil internal nature constantly trying to assert itself as Hellboy ages. Demonic creatures endlessly hunt and haunt him, filling his ear with tales of the destiny that has been foretold about him, and the brutal power he will wield if he allows himself to follow that path and take over hell. Hellboy does his utmost to ignore them. In the beginning he simply denies that the destiny is really his, often with a dismissive, “You’ve got the wrong guy,” or an angry, “It’s my goddamn life and I’ll do what I want with it!” Slowly he comes to terms with the truth that he is made of a mixture of good and bad. He reacts by actively nurturing the good, and he uses those positive efforts to justify himself when

\[22\] Mignola, Sinclair, and Brosseau, Hellboy: Wake the Devil, Chapter 5, 19.
demons attempt to demoralize him. An example of how he wrestles with such concerns occurs in the comic *Hellboy: Strange Places*, in which Hellboy fights off a demon’s attack by reminding it (and thus reminding himself), “Maybe I’m not exactly human, but for fifty years I’ve been out there saving lives, beating the crap out of things like you. That makes ME the good guy. You’re the monster.”\(^{23}\) Indeed, Hellboy grows to understand that his greatest weapon against evil is his humanity. Just as his innocent human delight in eating pancakes terrified the demons of hell when he was a child (back in Figure 6), he finds power in the human side of his adult self, too. As an adult, he is frequently attacked by evil spirits. In his struggles to fight them off, his horns become very long, presenting outer manifestations of the demon portion of his parentage. Mignola is showing the inadvertent blossoming of evil. However, horns notwithstanding, Hellboy’s adversaries are well aware that he is only *half* demon. In the midst of one vicious battle, the crowned spirit Ualac ridicules Hellboy as being too weak to rule in hell (Figure 7).

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Ualac taunts, “You have been living too long among them…You have almost become human.” Hellboy counters, “Well, that makes me a lot better than you,” and he wrenches the huge red horns—symbols of evil—right out of his skull in favor of his virtuous human side. Mignola thus equates Hellboy’s loathing of evil with a sense of disgust or shame for a part of his body—a feeling so strong that he feels compelled to chop it off to remove its bad influence. He would rather endure pain than forfeit his spiritual integrity. This painful action demonstrates the religious turmoil Hellboy feels over his destructive potential. Readers watch as he physically maims himself to control what he perceives as threateningly evil aspects of his nature. Mignola’s choice to locate that evil in a body part that can be amputated is a graphically expressive way to convey Hellboy’s active involvement in his spiritual life.

Christian imagery is another tool that Mignola uses for creating visual representations of inner struggles with sin. When a demonic skeleton scorns Hellboy for not understanding his true spiritual origins, Hellboy becomes uncontrollably curious about his ancestry. He returns to the church at which he first appeared on earth, hoping to find answers (Figure 8). Unfortunately, its old answers look like ashes.

Fig. 8: Mike Mignola, Dave Stewart. And Pat Broseau Hellboy: The Right Hand of Doom. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2000 by M. Mignola). [Part 3: “Right Hand of Doom,” panel 6 on page 4].
The crippled church is mostly rubble, but a few battered remnants of the edifice still tower above him. Hellboy looks tiny as he approaches with his devil’s tail peeking out of a trench coat that conceals his red body. His stride looks tentative, and his slumped shoulders and faceless, hornless head are a mixture of deference and weariness. He comes like a humble penitent or a sinner returning to God seeking forgiveness. The coat suggests that he is both aware of and ashamed of his own evil. Yet it is not apparent from the drawing that the church can help him fight that evil—the church itself looks defeated. The deeply shadowed darkness, the crumbled masonry of the walls, the ruined scrollwork grille under the arch, and the broken left half of the crucifix’s horizontal crosspiece are all visual indications that the church’s power has either rotted through neglect or been actively destroyed by evil forces, and so cannot sustain Hellboy. It is a powerless relic. Yet the symbols hold something crucial to understanding himself. He recalls later that he “slept there,” believing perhaps that sleep would produce a dreaming intervention for accessing God’s healing power. The quiet night scene, with its faintly illuminated path toward the cross, and the subtle brightening of the sky behind that cross, shows Hellboy drawing some inner peace and acceptance from the Christian images. By sleeping there—he prostrating himself on holy ground—he may find strength percolating into his body and soul. He may find that his true force is inside himself.

Dreams and visions are frequent vehicles for showing Hellboy’s internal efforts at discernment, but most examples are more nightmarish than the churchyard scene. An episode in The Wild Hunt provides an emotionally resonant illustration of a painful dream struggle. Walking through a decrepit mansion with a demon who is tempting him to abandon his religious resistance and just accept his destiny in hell, Hellboy passes a mirror (Figure 9). The mirror reflects Hellboy’s features accurately, including the stumps from his sheared off horns, but his normally red skin is tinted purple. Hellboy looks quizically at this new view of his face, wondering if the color change indicates greater personal evil than he has previously admitted to himself. He does not realize that this is a corrupted reflection created by his temptress. Its purpose is to convince Hellboy to take possession of a sword and a crown that have awaited him in hell for almost two thousand years. Hellboy has resisted that fate when it was spoken to him by demons, but now the urging appears to be coming from his own heart. The panels show his religious
struggle as being agonizingly intimate, fully inside himself. When the reflection predicts that Hellboy will enter Satan’s chamber in hell to “kill him while he sleeps,” Hellboy tries to access inner religious strength by setting his jaw firmly, although he wears a worried and uncertain expression as he glares at the purple face and tries to bravely spit out, “I doubt it.” That shaky phrase is the best he can muster at this moment, as he wonders to himself whether he actually has the strength or resolve to subdue his internal evil.

Fig. 9: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2010 by Mike Mignola). [Chapter 7 page 10].
It is clearly *not* enough. The reflection rebelliously announces, “I will,” and strains forward as though ready to find Satan and murder him immediately (Figure 10). A dramatic artwork change signals that this maneuverable part of Hellboy’s identity intends to drag him to hell. The purple alter-ego has shed Hellboy’s comfortable bathrobe, and grown horns and a blazing crown. As the beast approaches, Hellboy tenses into a fighter’s stance. His is suddenly his own enemy. Yet he still refuses to accept a brutal destiny in hell, even when the temptation comes from himself. The purple incarnation crashes out of the mirror, sword in hand (Figure 11). Red Hellboy lunges at him, shouting, “Oh no way… How many times do I have to tell you guys?! None of this crap is EVER going to happen!” He strikes out with his monstrous right hand, knocking the purple creature away in an attempt to annihilate this viciously threatening part of himself.

Fig. 10: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2010 by M. Mignola). [Chapter 7, panel 3 on page 11].

Fig. 11: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2010 by M. Mignola). [Chapter 7 page 14].
Then suddenly there is only one Hellboy (Figure 12). The demon who had been tempting him quietly says, “It’s only you.” Evidently Hellboy has been all alone, battling a hallucination. The frenzied action is gone, leaving a feeling of exhaustion from this explosion of internal spiritual confusion and uncertainty. The final panels are perplexing in that the crown and the beast have vanished, but the remaining Hellboy (in his bathrobe) has horns and purple skin. He sighs and murmurs, “Holy crap. What did I do?” Readers feel his confusion as they, too, wonder what spiritual rebalancing has just occurred. The internal fight left external damage—piles of rubble throughout the mansion—and shattered Hellboy’s assumption that he can control his beast. He is not necessarily the virtuous human that he has imagined himself to be. His more equivocal spiritual nature is shown by the residual purple color, which suggests that he is tarnished.

This is a way to show spiritual growth, as Hellboy recognizes that coming to terms with his own spirituality will mean facing enemies within himself, instead of assuming that all evil is outside in others.

Fig. 12: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2010 by M. Mignola). [Chapter 7, panel 1-3 on page 18].
Mignola’s abundance of *Hellboy* story arcs also provide an effective way to show the ongoing and often repetitive nature of internal spiritual struggles. Hellboy revisits many challenges that he surmounted in previous tales. Mignola illustrates this need to revisit spiritual lessons by showing Hellboy’s horns growing and breaking more than once. For instance, Hellboy meets a dream spirit who tempts him to take up a mighty sword and lead an army in hell. Unable to resist, he slips into violent visions of himself re-growing his severed horns and wielding a shard of that sword. He goes on a bloody rampage, accompanied by the sound of quotations from Revelation 13:13-14, which speak of the coming of the Beast of the Apocalypse. That beast’s crown hovers over Hellboy’s head, and flames fill his mouth, until Hellboy suddenly drops the shard and looks at his hands, repulsed by what he has done (Figure 13).

![Figure 13: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. *Hellboy: The Wild Hunt*. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2010 by Mike Mignola). [Chapter 6 page 17].](image)
From a haze of bloody redness, he shrieks “No!” in huge, thick, rough lettering that is followed by an even more anguished cry of “Nuuaa” as he rips the horns out of his head to stop himself from becoming the fiendish, murderous, apocalyptic beast. The horns that he had already removed, and the lust for evil that he has rejected over and over, have thwarted his good intentions again. He is afraid of himself and horrified by what he has become. The bright yellow background that appears once the horns snap is an indication of escape and relief. Breaking the re-grown horns shatters evil’s hold on Hellboy; but Hellboy’s struggle is still evident from the white-hot flash of pain jumping from his head. Even without the horns, he cannot help but hear the evil spirit continue to croon, “Take the sword. Your army will come and you’ll save your people.” Her words in this final panel come out of total blackness, as though there may be no hope for Hellboy, and he is doomed to the infinite darkness of pure evil. The story ends with Hellboy sitting alone in a field [not shown], horns gone and head limp. He does not appear to be ready to give up his quest for goodness, but at the same time he looks terribly exhausted. Mignola is showing the emotional toll of spiritual quests.

Hellboy’s struggles continue, and indeed he does eventually journey to hell. True to Muchembled’s characterization of American evil as a collection of personal demons that must be controlled, Hellboy continues to wrestle inside himself even in hell. When he finally reaches Satan’s chamber and is faced with fulfilling the destiny that foretold him committing murder to overtake hell, he once again defies his demons and refuses to kill Satan. He has repeatedly rejected this horrific destiny, saying “I don’t want any of it.”24 However, now as he stands in the infernal pit, the intense appeal to take hold of the murder weapon is repeated. He stands, silent and motionless, resisting all temptation to reach toward the handle of a dagger that a faceless, demonic spirit stretches toward him (Figure 14). Lines from Shakespeare’s Macbeth, evoking a dreamily executed murder, fill his ears. And suddenly, out of the dark, a bloody dagger clatters to the floor and Satan is dead. The weapon in the drawing is isolated by a

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black, unfathomable void, and the surrounding comic panels do not reveal whose hand wielded the murderous blade. Hellboy is convinced it cannot have been him, but Mignola offers no artistic proof.

The equivocal nature of whether or not Hellboy touched the dagger, or is truly conscious of any of his actions involving Satan, is haunting. Understandably, self-doubt creeps in. Hellboy stands alone, tragically sad, all in grey shadows (Figure 15). There is no devil-red coloring to his skin, and the scars of
his quest to resist evil are evident—the raw stumps where he broke off his horns, and the blank socket of the eye he gouged out to pay in treaty for an injury he once caused to a witch, Baba Yaga. He looks very weary, and very small, at the bottom of a narrow otherwise-empty panel. He is soul-searching, certain that he has not committed the vile deed: “I couldn’t have. I’d remember if I…”

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 15:** Mignola, Mike, Dave Stewart and Clem Robins. *Hellboy in Hell: The Descent.* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 2013 by Mike Mignola). [Chapter 3: “Family Ties,” panel 3 on page 18].

The lonely barrenness of the image and the hesitancy of the text suggest that he is no longer sure he can trust himself, despite the years of effort he has made to control his spiritual integrity and his destiny. The emotionally wrenching panel expresses spiritual struggles eloquently, providing a graphic illustration of the Muchembledian idea that the locus of America’s fear of evil has moved out of Satan, and into our own hearts.
CHAPTER 2: ANGEL ANGST IN NEIL GAIMAN’S THE SANDMAN

The Sandman author Neil Gaiman makes his comic book characters’ religious anxieties tangible by having them speak with unguarded frankness and introspection in the text, and by focusing intense artistic attention on their emotions, especially through meticulous development of body language and facial expression. These techniques are particularly evident in his angels, who frequently question or challenge Christian models of religious authority that conflict with their expectations about free will, justice, and personal autonomy. The angels are not intent upon rejecting God, but rather on securing more fulfilling ways to interact with Him. They want a deity who supports their freedom to change and grow, so when God’s inscrutability or apparent injustice stymies that pursuit, they react with visible indignation. Gaiman uses their emotions to represent religion as a yearning for a close and reciprocal relationship with a fair and empathetic god. He shows this desire for intimacy through angelic faces that are visibly different from traditional depictions of heaven’s vast hosts of serenely expressionless, nearly-identical beings, such as those decorating the dome of St Paul’s Within the Walls (Figure 16). In contrast, Gaiman’s angels appear as unique individuals with feelings. He zooms in on their personal thoughts, motivations, desires, and private interactions, as in his close-up of Lucifer weeping in Murder Mysteries (Figure 17).

Fig. 16: Host of Angels. 1881 Dome mosaic, St. Paul’s Within the Walls, Rome. Produced by Salviati’s Compagnia di Venezia-Murano based on the designs of Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. Salviati.com 2013

Fig. 17: P. C. Russell and N. Gaiman, Neil Gaiman’s Murder Mysteries (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, © 2002 by P.C. Russell). [page 49 panel 8].
Lucifer will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter, but here the panel serves to show text and image combining to convey an emotionally personal religious struggle. In the picture, Lucifer is still in the heavenly realm, grappling with how to mesh his boundless love for his Creator with his growing awareness of divine injustice. His radiant beauty is spoiled from crying, and his eyes are focused only on his own thoughts. Through pensive deliberation he knows that he cannot condone the injustice, but it is breaking his heart to oppose his Creator. Instead of portraying Lucifer as a defiant red-skinned, fist-shaking devil, Gaiman uses tears and a hushed “No” to show conflict in the angel’s soul. He creates many of these frank, passionate moments to represent religion as a deeply emotional engagement with God that ideally provides an individual with enough autonomy to have a say in shaping that relationship. Through emotion, he shows angels who want to be valued for having opinions, not for simply being quick to obey.

Gaiman’s depictions of internal moral struggles are especially evident in representations of the faithful angels in his mythic *The Sandman* domain, where these beings explore discordances between traditional religious authority and an eagerness for personal autonomy. Gaiman’s angels are deeply loyal to their Lord, so when they probe feelings of defiance, their words and faces ache sharply with the tension. Tears, furrowed brows, clenched fists, penetrating gazes, shouts of frustration, and slumped postures of exhaustion all feed into the message that contemplation is an arduous endeavor. Yet despite the pain, thinking openly is clearly considered a holy action. For instance, in *Murder Mysteries*, a tale that presages the central activities in *The Sandman*, Gaiman and collaborating artist Craig Russell show the comic’s supreme deity living in a room at the top of the highest spire of a heaven-like Silver City, where His role is exclusively to “remain here and ponder.”²⁵ By selecting thinking as the occupation of the realm’s supreme being and ultimate role model, Gaiman and Russell elevate free thought to a sacred status. The angels, who were made in the Creator’s image, naturally follow his example to ponder. They stare intently or gaze off into the distance, gathering thoughts that broaden their spiritual outlook.

The angels’ expanding outlooks sometimes make them assertively question divine ascendency. These provocative thoughts can be emotionally overwhelming, putting characters at a loss for words. Readers may become uncomfortable, too, hesitating to read what they imagine could be explicit heresies. In these cases, Gaiman turns to design elements instead of text for communicating religious experience. For example, he moves obliquely through the comic’s gutters to conveying complex ideas that are best understood gradually, through emotion. In these liminal spaces, much like in a prayer trance or on a solo pilgrimage, the reader can absorb religious sensations without feeling compelled to name or formally espouse them. By quietly weaving imaginative narrative threads and ideas about God through the blank spaces, Gaiman shows religion as a private arena for experimenting with changing the bounds of spiritual relationships. An example of religious activity transpiring in wordless passages occurs late in Gaiman’s *The Sandman: Season of Mists* (Figure 18). With no text, all meaning must be gleaned from visual clues.

![Fig. 18](image-url)

The panels are close-ups of the angel Remiel, whose name means Thunder of God, or by extension, Voice of God. He is the companion of Duma, Angel of Silence. We know from earlier parts of their story that Remiel is about to receive a message from God, whom they refer to as our Creator or The Name. Remiel had been awaiting the communication with an ethereal serenity, but now his eyes suddenly lose their pupils and fill with the eerie blaze of hot coals, as though reflecting a blinding fire. Fierce shadows eat at his previously silver-bright face and beautifully chiseled features, and his normally lush, mighty wings appear thin and tattered. His cheeks look skeletal, and his eyebrows form a quizzical expression, with one
horizontal and the other pinched into an inverted “V”. The dark stillness of everything in the panel except the glow reflecting from his eye sockets suggests that the angel’s personality and voice have been erased, leaving him empty and terrified. This heavy visual treatment produces a sense of foreboding that is confirmed upon crossing over to where the grey sky now erupts with golden light and explosive streaks. Remiel’s arms fly up and his mouth opens in…surprise? awe? fear? exultation? anger? Gaiman does not say. By leaving the drawing ambiguous, he shows the uncertainty inherent in trying to forge a relationship with the unseen divine. It looks terrifying. Communion with this spirit makes Remiel’s body look like a fragile shell bursting under the strain of the bright force filling him. A thunderous roar can be imagined coming from his open mouth, though maybe it is only heard in some other dimension, since no speech bubble materializes in the plane of the comic book. More evidence of an alternate plane is gathered by noticing that Remiel’s outstretched arms are mostly invisible, cut off by the sharp panel frames.

When the golden force abruptly withdraws, Remiel is left with his eyes closed and body bowed in limp exhaustion. His head bends so far forward that we see only his nose and creased forehead. His wings, which had disappeared during the burst, are again visible. What is this angel thinking? Does his limpness mean that he has submitted humbly to the divine force that blew through him, or does he feel something else, like frustration, or sorrow? The grey and black colorations seem to rule out joy. It is not clear whether the light gave something to Remiel or took something away instead. Perhaps the return to dark shadows means that Remiel is really nothing at all, merely a conduit for divine messages, a vessel to hold someone else’s words but never his own. The visual framing of the central panel supports this line of reasoning: The dark, motionless side panels and their respective stiff white dividers stand like guards, strictly blocking the angel’s emotions from entering the blaze to challenge the holy presence. On one hand, this suggests reverence. Remiel willingly maintains strict religious obedience as he receives the will of his Lord. On another hand, though, these heavy guard pillars give a feeling of imprisonment. Remiel is only animated (as indicated by his open mouth and upraised arms) when his Creator is speaking. Gaiman does not let the drawings break or overlap the edges of their frames at any point. His restriction seems to emphasize the danger of Remiel becoming just a vessel for God to fill, devoid of autonomous identity.
A feeling of being controlled continues after this puzzling triad of silent panels, as though Remiel is either not interested in asserting his own personhood, or not strong enough to do so. As Remiel shakes off his stupor, his first dazed words are, “We…I will relay the message. It is from my Creator”[emphasis added]. The hesitation between “We” and “I” is telling. Remiel, in referring to himself as “we,” seems momentarily unable to claim a separate identity from his master. Did he gain divine enlightenment in his blazing encounter, or was he simply swallowed up? Gaiman inserts this verbal stumble to seed readers’ thoughts about free will and rebellion. As he gains his composure, Remiel explores these ideas too. With a brave jaw but increasingly panicked eyes, he reveals the crux of the message he has received: the Creator’s good and faithful servants, Remiel and Duma, are being “rewarded” for their faithfulness by being installed as the new overseers of Hell. They are essentially being damned for their fidelity. Remiel suddenly shrieks a full-throated “No!” in denial, declaring he is being treated wrongly (Figure 19).


Revolted by the unfairness and doom implicit in these sacred instructions, the angel thunders “That is

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wrong!” He knows that he is blameless, fully worthy of heaven. Readers are visually reminded of his righteousness through the elegant cursive in which his “No!” and the rest of his speech appear. The smooth curves signal beauty and purity, quite different from the plain all-caps block lettering that is the standard in comics. The gracefulness visually affirms that he is heavenly.

Remiel’s fierce indignation in his “No!” is reminiscent of the anguished “No!” that bursts out of Will Eisner’s Jewish character Frimme Hersh (Figure 20), when Frimme learns that God has killed his little daughter in *A Contract with God*. Like Gaiman, Eisner focuses intimately on a specific individual.

![Figure 20](image_url)

**Fig. 20:** Will Eisner. *A Contract with God*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., © 2006 by W. Eisner). [p. 23].

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In Eisner’s portrayal of Frimme, the individual is a gentle, pious man whose only sin is to have had the audacity to expect that his steadfast commitment to God should be reciprocated with commensurate divine loyalty. In the passionate moment captured in this panel, Frimme is voicing the same sense of betrayal that Remiel feels when he realizes that his exemplary behavior as an angel has not stopped God from making unilateral—and seemingly unjust—decisions. Yet unlike the smooth cursive of Remiel’s howl of protest, Frimme’s “No!” is printed in big crude letters, indicating no elegance or elevated status at all. He is an earthy man in deep despair, not an angel. Both Frimme and Remiel are accusing God of acting unjustly—Remiel with his cry of, “That is wrong,” and Frimme with his bellow, “You can’t do this…We have a contract!!” Frimme’s indignation over what he perceives as a broken contract is made graphically evident by a patch of light on the wall behind him, in the shape of the Hebrew prophet Moses’ stone tablets. The Ten Commandments are missing, however, as though God has erased His etched words and refuses to be held accountable for an agreement with a mere man. Like the biblical Job, who vented at God, “What do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target?” (Job 7:20), Frimme reacts with fury. He recalls, as a child, asking his Rebbe whether God is just, only to hear the cryptic and unsatisfying reply, “If justice is not in God’s hands—where else would it be??” Now, Frimme’s horrified “No!” shouted in the dark room indicates that he has given up on a God whose hands evidently hold no justice.

The angels, in contrast, do not reject their Creator, despite their perception that they have been unjustly abandoned in Hell. Upon hearing his sentence, Remiel grapples with his disgust over a God who would damn his most beloved servants to Hell (Figure 21, on far right). Gaiman’s character Dream stands in the middle of the scene entirely unable to help. As Remiel struggles with his rage, Duma (feet, at far left) silently floats down into the dark agony that is pulsing around Remiel. Through five stacked panels, Duma—whose angelic feet were created too pure to ever touch ground—quietly descends to the fetid soil, where he makes an unimaginable sacrifice: he forfeits the glorious freedom of a soaring angel, in order to

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accept an undeserved sentence in Hell in place of his beloved companion Remiel. Gaiman’s illustrator Jones chooses to draw the silent Duma quite small during this descent, while making Remiel’s face comparatively large through that angel’s parallel emotional ascent from sadness to fist-clenched fury.

The size differential hints that the anger is justified and therefore most important. Readers might imagine that Remiel’s individualistic objections will finally induce both angels to reject God. However, Gaiman prefers a more intricate narrative to show the complexities of relationships with the divine. Remiel sees the prospect of hell as being the loss of everything that holds meaning for him. In contrast, Duma knows that if he were to go to hell instead of Remiel, he would still have two things that he could not keep by avoiding this awful destiny. First, if he went to hell, he would still have his self-respect for having maintained his promise of obedience to the Creator. Perhaps more importantly, he also would know that he had not sent his closest friend in the universe, Remiel, to such a fate alone. Duma’s love for Remiel—and the silent tears that stream down Duma’s face—touch Remiel’s heart, leading the enraged angel to quiet himself and promise [additional panels, not shown], “I cannot allow my fellow to drink from the cup that I have refused. I will go with Duma. I will go to Hell.”

The comic book style of weaving words and images is particularly effective here. The distance and detachment of the divine is manifested by the Creator’s total absence from these panels, right when the angels most need His comfort. Instead, through the images of the slowly approaching angel feet, we watch step by agonizing step as Duma makes his choice to defile himself in the filth of Hell, for his friend. The stacked five-panel arrangement amplifies how many chances Duma has to change his mind, and the equal number of times that he refuses to turn away and abandon Remiel. It creates an image of unshakeable commitment to each other. The angels would like to feel that their Creator is equally committed to them, and equally compassionate. Perhaps Gaiman is using this emotional episode to show religion as a process by which an intimate, equable relationship with God is best approached by first learning to form such relationships with one’s fellows.

Duma and Remiel show greater restraint in the face of injustice than does another, more famous, angel whom Gaiman depicts in the Sandman stories. Lucifer also starts off as a faithful angel who encounters what he perceives as divine injustice. As the Creator’s most beautiful angel, Lucifer is deeply emotional and introspective. Before his fall, he weeps when he discovers unfairness (back in Figure 1),

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and trembles as he forces out the words, “Then perhaps His will is unjust.” The realization leads him to exert his free will to rebel and leave the heavenly realm, but eons later he reveals he has gained no satisfaction or sense of personal autonomy from that decision. Gaiman shows him musing wearily in hell (Figure 22), “I thought I was defying His rule. No… I was merely fulfilling another tiny segment of His great and powerful plan” (panel 4). The sadness in his eyes and the deeply furrowed brow show terrible disillusionment over the idea that everything was predetermined. He feels God has used him as a pawn.

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**Fig. 22** Neil Gaiman and Kelley Jones. *The Sandman: Season of Mists*. (New York: DC Comics, © 1992 by DC Comics). [Chapter 2; p. 15 panels 1-4].

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Like Remiel, Lucifer wants to love his Creator and be loved and valued in return, but the deity seems to be oblivious to either angel’s faithfulness, and uninterested in discovering their unique virtues from among His untold numbers of interchangeable angels. Again, Gaiman is illustrating the challenge of retaining one’s individuality when crafting a relationship with God.

An episode from the angel story Murder Mysteries serves as a final example of how Gaiman uses detailed depictions of emotions and introspection to represent religion as the yearning for an intimate, just (or at least understandable) relationship between every individual being and his or her god. This comic is the tale of Raguel, who, while living in the heaven-like Silver City, gets a command from his Creator to destroy a fellow angel who has committed a murder out of love. After having completed the assignment, Raguel returns and bows low before his Lord, trying internally to rationalize what he has done, for he believes the punishment that he has dutifully carried out was in essence unjust. He does not feel right having executed a being for behavior that was prompted by love. The unconcerned deity simply commends and dismisses Raguel, but Raguel hesitates and then quietly implores, “No Lord…Not yet” (Figure 23). Raguel is desperate to find assurance that somehow there was goodness in God’s action.

![Fig. 23](image_url)

**Fig. 23**: P. Craig Russell and Neil Gaiman, *Neil Gaiman’s Murder Mysteries* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, © 2002 by P. Craig Russell). [page 50 panel 3].
Gaiman and his art collaborator P. Craig Russell show religious anxiety here through Raguel’s tensed muscles and clenched hands, as he tries to control an anguished desire to voice his objections. He kneels, with head touching the ground and face entirely blotted out by the deep shadow of his overhanging wings. The darkened head suggests that he feels he must conceal his true thoughts from the Divine, though he wants so badly to discuss them. Raguel is not trying to prove God wrong; he is trying to develop a relationship of genuine communication and understanding with Him. Raguel wants not so much to be right as to be heard.

The Lord, however, remains impassive. He is physically present, but emotionally unmoved. Russell and Gaiman visually accentuate this distancing by clothing the deity in a blue robe, instead of having him remain naked like his angels.\textsuperscript{33} Undeterred, Raguel tries to bridge the separation. He has an overwhelming impulse to question what he perceives as injustice, for he truly believes that the behavior of his now-executed fellow angel was entirely motivated by love, which God should have considered as a mitigating factor. Raguel really wants to understand why this was disregarded. The Lord pauses, then asks whether Raguel feels it was wrong to fulfill the role of exacting His vengeance. Shielding his face, Raguel bravely turns it upward to look into the deity’s “old, old eyes.”\textsuperscript{34} He begins to meekly validate his actions, saying, “It was my function” (meaning he was obediently doing what he had been commanded), but then sinks back onto the ground, saying, “But I do not think it was just. I think perhaps it was needed that I destroy [the angel], in order to demonstrate to Lucifer the injustice of the Lord.”\textsuperscript{35} There it is, the painful truth! The Lord’s agenda is only interested in Lucifer, and Raguel and the poor executed angel are of no more importance to Him than two tiny cogs in a machine! It was staged vengeance, used only for manipulation. Raguel has been trying in vain to find justice within this divine injustice, for in fact there was none. Raguel’s own concerns are immaterial to the emotionally distant Lord, causing a shock of disillusionment that Russell and Gaiman incorporate into the accompanying drawing of Raguel’s body:

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\textsuperscript{34} Russell and Gaiman, \textit{Neil Gaiman’s Murder Mysteries}, 51.
his reverently clasped hands and closed eyes are juxtaposed against a fierce tension in his coiled muscles, which look ready to explode like a sprinter poised at the starting blocks [not shown]. After God placidly tells him that these occurrences are unfolding precisely as He has willed them, there is a silent panel that contains only the kneeling Raguel, entirely alone at the very bottom of an empty sheet of grey. It is a lonely drawing, as though showing that additional words would be futile.

Yet, again Raguel rises, trying one more time to understand his Lord’s behavior (Figure 24). With the words, “I feel dirty. I feel tarnished. I feel befouled,” he expresses a palpable awareness of evil.

**Fig. 24:** P. Craig Russell and Neil Gaiman, *Neil Gaiman’s Murder Mysteries* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, © 2002 by P. Craig Russell). [page 53 panels 1-9].
He wants to believe the Creator only acts out of goodness, but doubt seems to have settled right on his skin. The moment is reminiscent of the tarnishing of Hellboy’s skin in the mirror scene noted in Chapter 1 of this paper. In Hellboy’s case, his skin turns purple with the residue of having come into contact with an evil facet of himself that he had not previously acknowledged. Here, Raguel rubs his skin as though it has taken on a stain from his discovery that his Lord is imperfect, keeping His angels only as pawns to fulfill a distant Plan. Raguel has made the discovery that the deity he adores actually values the precision of His unfolding plan more than He cares for fairness and intimacy with His individual creatures. Like Adam and Eve after losing their innocence, Raguel looks vulnerable and ashamed. He pulls his great wings close around his naked body, as though newly conscious of a filth having entered and soiled him. Raguel turns his back on the Creator, but lingers, looking wistfully over his shoulder, “hoping he would call me back… [and] explain every detail of his plan to me, somehow make it all better.” He appears very small in these narrow panels, with almost no artistic definition remaining in what had previously been elaborately detailed feathers and muscles. His fading image is representative of his dissolving hope for closeness with the divine. Finally, Raguel’s body becomes only a black silhouette, with even the silvery white of his wings having been blotted out by the falling darkness in the Creator’s chamber. He states, “But He said nothing,” and then the angel flies away in sad disenchantment.

Raguel differs here from Lucifer, though, in that although he leaves the Silver City, he does not denounce the Creator. His desire for religion—his yearning for a true spiritual relationship—refuses to be crushed. When Raguel shows up eons later as an old man on a bench in Los Angeles, he leans over to his bench-mate and assures the younger man, “I never fell…When the others fell, I didn’t fall. I’m still doing my job, as I see it. It doesn’t matter how long it is. I still want to go home.”36 Home is back in the Silver City. Raguel does not consider himself evil for having challenged the Creator’s fairness and justice, and he is certain that he does not belong in hell with fallen angels. He remains holy and worthy.

Raguel’s earnest insistence that spiritually he is still a loyal member of the heavenly realm, despite having questioned the Creator’s ways, is another instance of Gaiman using emotion to show

religion as a yearning for a divine relationship of understanding. The connection that Raguel seeks with his Lord can never be complete if it does not include room to question freely. Raguel wants to be listened to and to be answered honestly, and to be cherished as an individual. These are Remiel and Lucifer’s desires too, and the angels’ tears, anger, and frustration show how important their quests remain despite meeting such bitter challenges to understanding God’s ways. Gaiman’s intimate portrayals of his angels’ emotions as they struggle show how religion requires a fierce commitment to staying the course. Achieving a relationship with God that encompasses what these characters are after—justice, recognition of the individual, love, and the freedom to change and grow—takes enormous perseverance. Yet these heavenly beings do not give up. Perhaps Gaiman gives the angels such complicated desires in order to open up a space for human readers to consider the same questions and explore how they relate to themselves.
CHAPTER 3: MANGA—NAUSICAÄ OF THE VALLEY OF WIND

The manga series *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* by author and artist Miyazaki Hayao presents a visually immersive, emotionally evocative realm that stimulates close identification with its eponymous protagonist’s search for her spiritual place in the natural world. Two features intensify the story’s religious aspects. First, the iconography, which focuses primarily on nature, represents spiritual power independent of the strictures of organized faiths. Secondly, sensitive depictions of the protagonist’s emotional reactions to struggle effectively portray doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity as constructive components of a spiritual quest. Together, these accounts of religion reveal an intimate path of spiritual ease and flexibility that releases the seeker from the constraints of traditional belief systems and frees her to connect profoundly with forces of wonder, goodness, and suffering inherent in nature.

The tale’s deliberate separation from established religions mirrors the society in which it was created, since Japan reports extremely low rates of formal religious affiliation. Scholars of religion describe a pronounced Japanese shift during the 20th and 21st centuries away from traditional Buddhism and Shintoism, toward personal growth through shared experiences, celebration of life, concern for the natural world, rejection of war and nuclear power, and a deep curiosity about what being ‘human’ means. Miyazaki’s manga reflects a corresponding impulse to develop these themes while shunning overt ‘religious’ designations. He rejects the idea of an overarching “mighty intelligence,” and avoids proselytizing a specific belief or moral position, preferring to focus exclusively on making beautiful, exquisitely crafted entertainment. Yet he recognizes that narrative significance within the highly participatory medium of manga is not really under his control; it evolves after the artist lets go of his or her work and frees it to be experienced. At that point, even the artist may discover new, unintended meaning. For example, in interviews, Miyazaki maintains that he does not write or draw from a theistic

perspective: “If we take the [existence of] god as a premise, we can explain the world by that. But I can’t do that.”

Yet, upon returning to finished versions of *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, he reports surprise at finding himself “deeply immersed in the religious domain.”

Like his readers, he finds that the book’s psychologically introspective and emotionally expressive panels create a spiritual environment that exists beyond formally established dogma.

The second appeal of *Nausicaä’s* religious style—its lack of conclusive answers—feeds into this contemporary desire to look for one’s own fate instead of taking a predetermined path. Miyazaki represents religion as a perplexing personal challenge, full of spiritual inconsistency and ambiguity. He does not color his manga, preferring to concentrate attention on the characters’ emotional expressions. Even in grave scenes, there is a certain playfulness and openness to spiritual experimentation in his artwork, and an invitingly nonjudgmental attitude toward seeing possibility within incompleteness. He draws faces full of puzzlement, wonder, or frustration as his characters dredge up moral and philosophical questions for which they see no firm answers. His protagonist Nausicaä moves spiritually in a general direction, but the path is by no means clear, and she struggles with her convictions and readjusts her stance again and again. The manga medium is well suited to articulating this open variability. Sketched lines, tiny boxes, very limited room for dialogue, and a compensating exaggeration of facial expressions and body language create an incomplete, often ambiguous presentation of the characters’ reality. In this way, the panels show spiritual incompleteness and ambiguity as fertile places for religious discovery.

This uncertain spiritual itinerancy is evident when Nausicaä reveals inner fears to her mentor, Yupa (*Figure 25*).

Nausicaä is a gentle, animal-loving, pacifistic girl trying to cleanse a toxic post-apocalyptic world and teach loving coexistence to its warring inhabitants. Here, her pacifist values are contradicted by a decision to go to war, and she comes close to tears as she painfully acknowledges the

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42 Note: All *Nausicaä* images in this paper are taken from Miyazaki’s *Deluxe Edition*, and so should be read from right to left, beginning at the upper right panel on each page of manga, and ending in the lowest left panel.
presence inside herself of a hatred so evil that she could kill. Miyazaki begins this encounter between master and pupil by showing Nausicaä brightly lit as she buries her face in the darkness of Yupa’s embrace, crying, “I don’t want to go to war!” Yupa’s thought bubble is just a line of dots, as though she has advanced beyond any spiritual help he can offer. He holds her tightly while straddling a split between light and darkness, suggesting that he knows the danger that she is facing as a warrior trying to balance good and evil. Going further with this visual line of contrast, Miyazaki’s artistic choice to shade only Yupa’s hat and clothing in heavy darkness creates an implicit message that the customary ways of Nausicaä’s people, embodied in one of its wisest old men, have become insufficient. The brightly lit, youthful Nausicaä senses the existence of paths that are better—spiritually more freeing—than the darkness of war, but she hesitates to give up the warm embrace of tradition in order to explore those
paths. Her hidden face illustrates vividly the impulse to turn back, frightened that she cannot control the forces that flood her with this insistent light. Presently, she lifts her head, voicing concern that she could easily be overwhelmed by her anger. She confesses that the hatred she feels for her people’s enemy may grow so strong that “I won’t be able to control it anymore.” Her eyes are dark and worried, piercing the distance as though she can see into the future. Her mouth is a thin line, and her jaw looks set with a determination to act on her hatred if need be; but she looks simultaneously repulsed by knowing she is capable of such destruction.

Suddenly, additional luminance eliminates the shadows that had dappled the pair, showing a moment of enlightenment. Nausicaä no longer reaches back into the darkness of custom for strength, but instead stands tall in a flood of new light that is so intense that it even bathes old Yupa in its glow. Nausicaä is struck with unexpected empathy for the Ohmu, which are huge creatures whose children are being killed by the enemy. Her own terrifying sensation of uncontrollable hatred has opened her eyes to the agonizing feelings that an Ohmu must experience when denying its gentle nature so that it can defend its innocent babies. She murmurs, “I can understand…The hate takes over and makes him kill, and then he cries.” She grasps the emotional complexity of the sacrifices that the Ohmu are forced to make.

Artistically, Miyazaki shows the far-reaching importance of this moment by drawing it from above. By forcing the reader to step back and grasp a broader view, he is emphasizing that Nausicaä’s new spiritual connection with the Ohmu’s plight has caused her to begin moving outward, in hopes of saving the larger world. Miyazaki continues to extend this idea of increased responsibility by turning next to show her looking out a window. The inner room is shadowed, and bright light from outside slips through prison-like bars on the window, falling only on her face. The indication is that staying safely at home (in the darkness) to avoid war is paradoxically more evil than the brighter promise of going out to kill the enemy and thereby save her own people as well as the Ohmu. Nausicaä’s eyes are very sad and Miyazaki’s placement of her looking up toward the window above makes her look especially small and vulnerable. She is suffering under the burden of her altruism and goodness, but the lightness outside pulls her, and
she says, “I have to go.” Miyazaki is showing through her conflicted emotions that although the light flexibility of her spirituality feels freeing, it also imposes some heavy obligations.

Meanwhile, her outward gaze is juxtaposed with a close view of Yupa turning inward. His suddenly dilated eyes glow out from under his hat brim, in a different kind of awakening than Nausicaä’s. His drilling pupils make him look amazed, despite the rest of his facial expression being totally obscured by his beard. His face is fully lit as he voices a spiritual revelation: “What a fool I’ve been! I’ve spent half my life searching for the key to the mystery of the forest—and I never saw that it was inside this girl.”

Yupa represents the traditional ways that Nausicaä is moving beyond. Miyazaki’s placement of her near the window while Yupa stands separate, with his back to her now, shows that Yupa is still part of the darkness from which Nausicaä is freeing herself. His love and wisdom will go with her, but their separately-focused eyes indicate that in the end, they both know that Nausicaä’s spirituality will be stronger on its own.

Another example of finding one’s own path when searching for equilibrium between good and evil is in an almost wordless series of drawings in which a pet squirrel fox leads Yupa to find Nausicaä (Figure 26). Nausicaä has gone off by herself somewhere, and Yupa, becoming concerned, strides with purpose to find her, his great cloak billowing behind him. He travels steadily downward through enormous piles of abandoned weaponry that litter the foundations under the king’s castle. He notes as he passes these silent relics that “No one ever comes down here,” perhaps suggesting that no one “comes down” to look at the spiritual foundations of his people anymore, either. The lifeless mounds of metal that he and the squirrel fox pass are graphic reminders of the ancient apocalyptic battle that laid their earth to waste. Suddenly, Yupa comes around a corner and stops abruptly. His eyes blaze and a jagged, wordless thought bubble appears in the air, like a small explosion of astonishment. His view opens into a vibrant oasis of living plants. It is a secret garden, and Nausicaä is sitting at its center, meditating. Even with Miyazaki’s trademark black-and-white palette, the garden seems alive with color. The room is airy and bright, despite its location deep underground. Nausicaä has nurtured these plants back to health, protected from the poisonous atmosphere of their polluted world. It is a tiny return to nature, and an indication of
how the whole earth could be if she could save it. However, her silent look in the last panel shows her fear that it is impossible. Her anguished eyes and tiny mouth, sunk to the very bottom of her chin, radiate ineffable sadness. The existence in the world of evil that would kill such beauty feels unbearable.

**Fig. 26:** Miyazaki. *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 79 panels 3-9].
This discovery of a garden of lightness and rebirth hidden under a graveyard of the massive metal corpses of war machines is one of many instances in which Miyazaki uses images of lightness to depict a spirituality in sync with nature, and heaviness to describe spiritually outdated or corrupt approaches. For example, Miyazaki develops a feeling of the horrible weightiness of evil in the way he portrays the God Warriors, which are the dead hulks of ancient sentient machines. These artifacts of the pre-apocalyptic days of Nausicaä’s world were created generations ago as mighty technological wonders. The scientists and inventors were proud of their work. Yet instead of being a boon for humankind, the mechanical giants turned against technology. They sought to punish scientists who had raped the land of its resources and destroyed the purity of nature. The wonders turned into demons, who initiated the cataclysmically destructive ‘Seven Days of Fire’ that poisoned the planet to near human extinction. Now, Nausicaä must stop unscrupulous present-day humans who want to repair the God Warrior machines and rekindle their evil powers. Miyazaki draws the ancient contraptions on a scale that dwarfs humans, and he shows one of their graveyards as a yawning pit into which people inexplicably fall to their deaths. Even when lifeless, these enormous masses exude an evil seductiveness. One character who cannot resist that pull is Kurotowa, a corrupt royal counselor, who comes upon one of the ponderous behemoths as it looms above him, a once-invincible force that sits alone now, crumbled and silent. Miyazaki sketches Kurotowa [not shown here] as a thin, insubstantial-looking man with dark devious eyes and a greedy sneer, musing, “A God Warrior...If I could control it, even the throne would be no daydream.” He stands in partial shadow, the darkness emphasizing his dangerous role in the fragile balance between good and evil. The appeal of awakening such a force to empower himself is irresistible, and he lusts after the colossal physical mass of this corroded God Warrior, hoping to piece it together and revive its deadly spirit.

In contrast to these monstrous rusted, earth-bound machines buried in pits of filthy darkness, Nausicaä’s own power looks impalpably light. Miyazaki draws her body to be fair and slender, soaring through the air on a cloud-white glider, looking like an angel (Figure 27). Fresh air is treasured on the polluted planet, and Miyazaki uses wind imagery to associate Nausicaä with its ethereal pureness.

Fig. 27: Miyazaki. Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 168 panel 11].

The exposed manner in which she hangs in the sky when she flies, trusting the air completely, shows that she is mentally and physically entwined with the spirit of her land’s protective winds. Admirers variously describe her as flying “like the wind itself,” 46 and “like a hawk,” 47 and “like a tiny swallow.” 48 Her dying father marvels that she can sense where to pilot her mehve, or glider, with just the “touch of a breeze on

46 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 120 panel 4.
48 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 162 panel 1.
her skin. " The evil that she faces is formidable, but she holds the advantage of agility. The aggression and inherent destructiveness of the enemy’s violent machines are compromised by their inability to react and change. While she adapts and grows, they have become calcified, tethered to the ground physically and, by extension, spiritually. The lightness of Nausicaä’s body and her tiny glider allow her to escape on the winds, working with nature rather than against it, soaring beyond the reach of dark powers. These images of freedom and ease translate into spiritual ease and authenticity. Nausicaä is not using physical heft to wrestle resources or lands away from anyone else, but rather she is working with a mystical lightness to understand her own place in the world and her responsibility to her fellow beings. She is a part of nature, not its adversary.

Miyazaki frequently demonstrates Nausicaä’s attraction to nature’s graceful lightness, and her aversion to physical weight, with metaphoric allusions to also avoiding spiritual weight. He uses her ability to soar confidently without tethers or anchors as a way to show religion as a form of intangible support that can be trusted without needing to hang onto the weight of strict tradition. Two notable examples of Nausicaä metaphorically letting go come during battles. First, Nausicaä is fighting alongside the ancient men of her valley to defend it against invaders. They are using a fleet of pre-apocalyptic planes that Nausicaä’s people cherish because, as one of her uncles explains, “We’ve lost the wisdom to build these engines, many long centuries past.” Age has made the planes seem exotically mysterious, and so villagers revere them like religious artifacts. Nausicaä privately thinks that the old planes, and the heavy gunship in particular, are ugly and unresponsive compared to her glider, because “The gunship cuts through the wind, but mehve rides upon it.” She displays her understanding of riding the wind when enemies start shooting down their airships, and she shouts, “I’ll save your lives…Dump your cargo! Lighten the barge!” In an aeronautic sense, the planes gain lift when their loads are lightened, but she also seems to be indicating that the old ways—the unchanging religious parameters that her people cling

49 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 27 panel 4.
50 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 29 panel 7.
51 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 29 panels 8-9.
52 Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 97 panel 2.
to—are dragging them down. She wants to jettison the excess weight of the old ways and rise into a lighter spiritual reality.

Nausicaä also throws off heaviness when she and a boy are trying to outwit enemy fighters by fleeing together on her tiny mehve. The glider is only meant to support one person, so again Nausicaä advises getting rid of excess weight so that this fragile hope for escape might somehow hold them above the danger. Already they are carrying almost nothing, so Nausicaä strips off her tunic. The ancient women of Nausicaä’s land sewed this magical garment for her before she went to battle. Recalling the day she received the tunic, Miyazaki draws the old women in hooded, shapeless robes that are dark, much like Yupa’s old black cape, creating sharp contrast with Nausicaä’s youth and brightness (Figure 28). The women have poured all of their wisdom into this clever and beautiful armor, imbuing each of its scales with “Spells to protect you from arrow and shell.” These old seers’ eyes are nearly closed with wrinkles of age, but their love for Nausicaä is evident from the way they gently touch her while grooming her hair, and from the smiles and sage advice they offer for her protection. They believe that their rituals are the only source of safety, telling her to never let go of the magic tunic: “You mustn’t take it off until you’re home and safe in the valley, not even when you sleep.” The ancients also direct the valley children to supply Nausicaä with magically sustaining chiko nuts, and prayers to the God of the Wind. Like other dark/light scenes in this story, Miyazaki creates a diagonal division through the page, with shadows predominating along the side where the old women dress Nausicaä with their magic, and lightness predominating where children appear, especially when they offer her their prayers to the wind. Those prayers are the gift that Nausicaä says she will specifically treasure. Indeed, once in battle, Nausicaä jettisons the magic tunic—the weight of the old belief system—and hangs onto the wind instead.

These episodes illustrate that the girl has a spirituality that is stronger than that of her precarious community. Yupa recognizes that Nausicaä holds “a wondrous power we don’t share. She can hear voices

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we don't hear...she reads the very soul of the wind...Her power’s not meant for war. Aye, it’s meant to heal something, to heal some wound." Yet although this power is beneficent and life-giving, it is also

Fig. 28: Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 77].

Miyazaki, Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 77 panels 4-5.
fearsome to Nausicaä: Yupa reports that “She was shaking… terrified of the uncontrollable forces she has glimpsed within herself.”\textsuperscript{55} Her alarmed reaction suggests that she is still growing into herself, and does not yet recognize or understand her true spiritual essence.

As Nausicaä matures spiritually, she becomes increasingly aware that being a part of nature involves sometimes accepting a lack of control. Her interactions with a blind Dorok priest illustrate how forces of great magnitude flow over and through her, like the wind on her skin, but are often not under her command (\textbf{Figure 29}). The priest, whom she calls the Holy One, is highly attuned to spiritual forces. He will sacrifice himself in the act of ushering Nausicaä in as the fulfillment of a long-held prophecy.

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\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{55} Miyazaki, \textit{Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind}, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 65 panel 9.
At this point in the story, the priest is still alive. Factions of the small population of humans who survived the Seven Days of Fire have recently declared war upon each other, creating widespread panic. The scene begins with the Holy One comforting battle refugees, by telling them (through the gas mask that protects his pollution-scarred lungs) of the arrival of the hoped-for “Angel of Light,” who will “lead you to the Pure Land.” In the tradition of the Greek Tiresias and many other blind prophets, the Holy One is able to ‘see’ spiritually, “in vision as clear as day,” and he describes to the people his image of Nausicaä approaching, “garbed in raiment of blue, descending upon a field of gold.” He goes on to assure them in a later panel [not shown] that the prophecy promises she will “forge anew our ties with the lost land.”

In essence she will lead them to a safe future by connecting to precious pieces of their past. Miyazaki’s drawing here of a long-lens pastoral view of gentle Nausicaä striding purposefully through a vast, open, sunny field—a field offering enormous space and freedom—contrasts stirringly with the first panel’s close-up depiction of scores of desperate refugees crowded together in darkness, crammed to the very edges of the panel. There is little room for them, and almost no air. The field scene in the much bigger third panel, with scudding clouds and grasses softly waving in a breeze, emphasizes how Nausicaä will bring a world of healthy nature and fresh air to replace the squalor of the desecrated land and its poisonous fumes.

This image of nature’s wholesome purity indicates that Nausicaä’s power is spiritual, in the sense of being able to effect change through natural nurturing qualities of her heart and mind. This is in contrast to wielding physical power—the destructive power of guns and poisons and nuclear warheads—which were the agents of change that the God Warriors employed and nearly perfected. Nausicaä walks completely unarmed in the priest’s idyllic field, and the perception is that she is completely safe there, held in the hand of the limitless spiritual power seen in nature. It is another example of Miyazaki’s use of nature-based iconography to separate spiritual goodness from the strictures of organized faiths. He shows Nausicaä, imagined here as the “Angel of Light,” bypassing heavy, inflexible religious traditions so that she can directly connect with the wonder, strength, and goodness evident in nature. The nimble ease with

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which she moves accentuates her freedom. The refugees hold this representation of religion in their minds, clinging with frightened hope to the Holy One’s prophesy. They want to believe in something bigger than their choked world.

The prophecy scene pulses with a power of healing and beauty, but a close look reveals that suffering permeates its symbols. The blind priest sees Nausicaä on a “field of gold” because of a vision that he senses when she is trying to save giant Ohmu creatures from being used as pawns in a human battle.\textsuperscript{57} While trying to help, Nausicaä’s foot receives painful acid burns from a toxic lake. The Ohmu lift her onto a swaying sea—‘field’—of their golden tendrils and regenerate the disfigured foot (Figure 30). Similarly, the “raiment of blue” in which she is dressed comes as the result of suffering. The garment

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\textsuperscript{57} Miyazaki, \textit{Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind}, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 204.
itself was given to Nausicaä by a bereaved refugee mother who wanted her murdered daughter’s spirit to live on through the girl’s favorite dress.\textsuperscript{58} The fabric becomes blue when Nausicaä is drenched with the blue blood of a dying baby Ohmu.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, the prophecy seems to be filled with the power of purity and goodness, but it is also formed from tragedy. Miyazaki’s juxtapositions of such similar pictures with very different meanings show the necessity of learning to accept nature’s full spectrum. Suffering is a part of nature, and therefore is a part of who we are as humans. The goal is not to eliminate all suffering, but to recognize it, and to develop the strength and grace necessary for learning how to suffer.

As Nausicaä’s spiritual powers strengthen, she realizes that she faces grave danger in using them against evil. In choosing to do good, she risks subjecting herself to physical injuries from increasingly intense spiritual warfare. This becomes a reality in the blind priest’s final days. Nausicaä’s sensory abilities are so matured by now that she can physically see and hold the soul or life-force of the old priest as he lies dying, stabbed by dozens of guards from the corrupt Council of Monks (\textbf{Figure 31}).\textsuperscript{60}

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\textsuperscript{58} Miyazaki, \textit{Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind}, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 151 panels 3-10.
\textsuperscript{59} Miyazaki, \textit{Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind}, Perfect Collection vol. 1, p. 201 panel 5.
\textsuperscript{60} Miyazaki, \textit{Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind}, Perfect Collection vol. 1, pp. 246, 253.
These monks have twisted their priestly spirituality into a vicious weapon. Their Council represents a perversion of sacred ideals that atrophied when the religious institution’s identity and political position become more important that its spiritual goals. The Council has turned on this blind priest for his rejection of their warmongering. They are stubbornly following a religious doctrine that does not allow for change, while the priest (like Nausicaä) has been willing to change and accept new ideas that might unite former adversaries and save the dying world. This rigid council therefore provides sharp contrast to Nausicaä’s nature-oriented spiritual openness. It shows fatal inflexibility.

The priest, however, remains cleverly flexible to the very end. In this episode, he makes a final attempt to support Nausicaä by sending out a spiritual projection of himself. His essence, or mental form, comes to her as a blazing orb that she cradles in her hands and then clasps to her breast as he weakens. Miyazaki’s pictures make this orb look like a single star in the cold dark heavens, which then bursts with the blaze of a sunrise banishing the evils of nighttime when Nausicaä takes the priest’s energy to her heart. Simultaneously, a powerfully evil brother of the Dorok Emperor senses Nausicaä’s presence, perhaps attracted by this glow in her arms. She is capable of telepathic communication, so he calls to her mind, creepily tempting her like a biblical Satan to “Come unto me” (Figure 32). Miyazaki draws the fiend as a foul star-speckled mass of squirming worms or intestines that drip inky blood. Whether

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 32: Miyazaki. *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 261 panels 6-9].
Nausicaä’s halting recognition that “He...He is evil” would be enough to help her resist him is unknown, because suddenly an enormous explosion blasts the demon away from the girl (Figure 33). The burst is the dying gasp of the blind priest, which shot out enormous energy just as the demon shaped itself into a massive hand and tried to seize Nausicaä. The force of the priest’s explosion brings the emperor’s brother back to his natural body, and he gasps “HNNG...!” while rubbing his burned fingertips. The blind priest’s

![Figure 33: Miyazaki. Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 262 panels 1-5].](image)
dead body lies flattened in a pool of dark blood, deflated by the exit of his spirit. The emperor’s brother fumes above him, furious that this brave priest, the Holy One, has managed to interfere “even as his [the priest’s] spirit faded away.” The priest has sacrificed himself to ensure that the girl in the prophecy would survive. The drawing of the explosion is unnerving in its destructiveness, as though shrapnel is shooting everywhere. Miyazaki decimates the intestine-pile spirit, showing only a few curly chunks left to fly toward the peripheries of the panel. The blast has been less deadly for the girl, but there is still clear damage. Although her head, legs, and arms remain connected, there are no longer enough pencil lines forming her torso. Indeed, on the next page, after the spirit world has withdrawn, Nausicaä loosens her top buttons to reveal a severe burn on her chest [not shown].

Spiritual warfare has manifested as a physical wound above her heart. The priest saved her, but there was a physical price to pay. Miyazaki always returns to the lightness of religion, though, so he does not let Nausicaä remain weighted down by this evil. He ends this section of *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind* with a prayerful drawing of Nausicaä bowing in humble thanksgiving, hands clasped, facing the rising sun (Figure 34). It is an image of renewal. She is trying to come to terms with the enormity of the gift that the old blind priest—the Holy One—has given by sacrificing his life for her. Her thought-bubble reads, “The Holy One protected me…”, and the sunward side of her body is apparently glowing with the dawn, but the reader only sees her in shadow. Miyazaki draws no features on her face, and the panel is cropped close to hide any indication of where she is headed. It is an effective way to indicate Nausicaä’s struggle between the inner powers she holds and the outside powers she faces. Miyazaki represents religion as protective and nurturing, but simultaneously incomplete and ambiguous. The panel’s sketched style and limited words echo the ineffable feeling that haunted Nausicaä’s silent eyes when she sat contemplating nature’s mixture of strength and vulnerability in her secret garden under the palace (back in Figure 26). It is noteworthy that in this final panel, Miyazaki has shifted his customary brightness away from Nausicaä and onto the sunrise. The uncharacteristic darkness of Nausicaä’s body shows that much of what she

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seeks is still beyond her, and she has more to learn as she opens herself to the spiritual possibilities that she recognizes in nature’s winds. The emotional weight of this bowed drawing indicates the effort involved in letting go to look for one’s spiritual place in the world.

Fig. 34: Miyazaki. Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 1 p. 264 panel 1].
CONCLUSION

My explorations of the preceding works by creators Mike Mignola, Neil Gaiman, and Miyazaki Hayao resulted in no profound discoveries or breakthroughs. That outcome is appropriate, as these comics do not seek to provide answers. They offer space for wonder and questioning, which is enough. That space is full of uncertainty, making it a rich field in which to grow one’s spirituality. By intimately experiencing the characters’ affective reactions to doubt and inner religious struggles, readers grow more courageous about trusting their own curiosity and insights, and building an internal spiritual life of understanding. The comics empower readers to value their own feelings as guides for religious seeking. I conclude here with three faces that the artists thrust toward us, blocking our view of anything but the emotion that is driving each character’s spiritual quest. First, Hellboy sits slumped at a table (Figure 35).

Fig. 35: Mike Mignola, Duncan Fegredo, and Dave Stewart. Hellboy: The Storm and the Fury. (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, © 1997 by Mike Mignola). [page 57, panels 2-4].
He remembers the playful, loving looks and secret hand signals that he used to exchange with the kind professor who adopted him as a child and unflaggingly believed in the boy’s innate goodness. As an adult, Hellboy now cradles his face in his one human hand, deeply unsure that he will ever live up to the Professor’s image of him. In the second picture, Raguel looks into the old eyes of his Maker, knowing that by having dutifully fulfilled his divinely-commanded function, he has actually acted immorally (Figure 36). Like Hellboy, he is full of doubt. He cannot understand how goodness fits into such pain.

Finally, the last set of eyes belong to Nausicaä (Figure 37). Nausicaä knows that it would be comforting to stay in the forest with the boy Selm forever, never having to change. Grave doubts loom in her, however, because she senses that she must change in order to grow into her true spiritual self. The struggle brings tears to her eyes. Each of these zoomed-in presentations of faces and feelings brings alive
the deeply human nature of their seeking style of spirituality. Each succeeds at showing religion as an internal struggle being glimpsed through the window of emotion.

Fig. 37: Miyazaki. *Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind*, Deluxe Edition 1 (SF: VIZ Media LLC, © 1987 by Nibariki Co.). [Volume 2 p. 243 panels 8-10].
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