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MONSTER COMICS, WETLANDS, AND THE WEIRD

Steve Gerber's Man-Thing and Alan Moore's Swamp Thing

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how comic books set in wetlands have used weird tropes to explore environmental ideas. The essential wetness of landscapes made these places hostile to humans. Hence, these ecosystems were often seen in a negative light or as places that were supernatural and alien. Swamp monsters, like Marvel's Man-Thing and DC's Swamp Thing were used by comic creators to promote ecological themes. These characters were steeped in weird tropes as well. Just as these wetlands were both water and land, these

monsters were both human and inhuman. Marvel's Man-Thing came to embody the divide between both water and land and this world and other strange dimensions. DC's Swamp-Thing was used by Alan Moore to show how the weird is connected to the human-nature divide.

KEY WORDS: wetlands, comic books, Everglades, Alan Moore, Swamp Thing

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INTRODUCTION

Wetlands have often been fertile ground for stories about the mystical, the supernatural, and the weird. In the 1970s and '80s, both major American comic book companies published off-beat and critically-acclaimed comics that centered on swamps and swamp-monsters. Steve Gerber's work on Man-Thing for Marvel Comics, and Alan Moore's version of DC's Swamp Thing reflected new environmental ideas. While they still presented swamps and marshes as mystical and monstrous places, these authors challenged negative views of wetlands. These books were also influenced by the weird.

Swamps were both water and land, a combination of two opposites that challenged conventional Western ideas about nature. Just as these swamps were inherently contradictory and weird places, these swamp monsters transcended their horror roots and were transformed into weird human/nature hybrids. Man-Thing and Swamp Thing's very identities were used by Gerber and Moore to explore the inherent weirdness of the human/culture divide. By turning a swamp into the nexus of all realities, Gerber connected the ecological health of the Everglades to the barriers between dimensions. When the Everglades' ecology was threatened, reality itself was threatened by extra-dimensional beings. Moore builds on Gerber's work and shows that the weird is perhaps another manifestation of the human divide. When Swamp Thing understands the dualities within himself he is able to unlock his true power, save reality from destruction, and attain inner peace.

WETLANDS AND COMIC BOOKS

Wetlands, like swamps and marshes, are some of the biologically productive and ecologically important ecosystems in the world. These places have had a similarly lush and important set of ideas applied to them throughout Western history. In the United States, before the onset of modern environmentalism in the 1970s, swamps and marshes were viewed in a negative light. Environmental historians, like Ann Vilesis, Richard Siry, and Jack Davis, have documented how these negative views of wetlands were the handmaiden to efforts to drain and destroy wetlands. Wetland scholars have also shown how swamps and marshes were seen as haunted, supernatural places, full of unknown horrors and mysterious threats. Wetlands were seen as hostile places that could not be controlled by society or easily turned into commodities. Most Americans avoided wetlands, which in turn became refuges for oppressed people. In the United States, swamps and marshes were often the site of maroon communities, sanctuaries for escaped slaves, and havens for Native Americans fleeing white

oppression.²

Both their biological importance and these cultural ideas stem from a central fact about wetlands: they are both land and water. This blending of two opposites creates great potential for biological life, but also makes these landscapes inhospitable and hostile to humans. Humans are a terrestrial species that evolved on the savanna and have had great difficulty in domesticating and controlling these wet environments. Throughout most of Western history, drainage was seen as the only sure-fire way to control these spaces. Due to their uncontrollable nature and hostility, these ecosystems were often painted in a negative light. These ideas about wetlands reflected broader Western ideas about nature and the human-nature divide. In this view, humans were separate from nature, and at odds with the natural world. Wetlands, as places fundamentally hostile to humans, were the most “natural” places in nature. They were not just viewed negatively, but in ways that painted them as alien and inhuman.

Swamps and marshes are one of the strongest natural embodiments of the weird. Throughout Western culture, these ecosystems have been the locus of the supernatural, the home of witches and monsters, and the haunt of ghosts and ghouls. These places are inherently weird as well. According to Mark Fisher, the weird is a “conjoining of *two or more things that do not belong together*.”³ Wetlands are both water and land, two polar opposite things that do not and cannot belong together, according to conventional Western ideas about nature. As Fisher writes, the weird, like wetlands themselves, illustrates how “categories which we have up till now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid.”⁴ Wetlands challenge our dichotomies concerning the natural world, and the very foundations of Western ideas about nature and culture.

Environmental historians have examined how swamps and marshes in the United States have anticipated larger changes in perceptions of the natural world.⁵

² On negative views of wetlands see: Jack Davis, *An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Joseph V. Siry, *Marshes of the Ocean Shore: Development of an Ecological Ethic* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984); Ann Vileisis, *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands*, (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999). On cultural views of wetlands see: Rodney James Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996); Barbara Hurd, *Stirring the Mud: On Swamps, Bogs, and Human Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); David C. Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Anthony Wilson, *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009). On wetlands as refuges see: Jack Temple Kirby, *Poquosin: A Study of Rural Landscape and Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Megan Kate Nelson, *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Laura A. Ogden, *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 11 (emphasis in the original).

⁴ Fisher, 15.

⁵ See footnote 1, especially Vileisis, *Discovering the Unknown Landscape*.

Beginning in the 1930s and accelerating in the 1970s, wetlands were reconsidered and revalued. The insights of the science of ecology, which became an established field in the 1930s, uncovered the biological and ecological value of wetlands.⁶ Rather than dank morasses filled with pestilent insects and poisonous snakes, these places were biological treasure troves that provided important ecosystem services to humans. Ecological ideas became popular in America in the 1970s, and attitudes towards wetlands likewise shifted.⁷ These changes can clearly be seen in popular literature featuring swamps and marshes. As wetlands were revalued, ideas about the weirdness of swamps and marshes shifted as well. Wetlands remained weird places, but swamp monsters became defenders of nature and reflections of humanity's own relationship with the natural world. Instead of fearful, weird creatures that existed outside of human knowledge, these swamp monsters became celebrations of the weird.

These changing ideas about wetlands and the weird can best be seen in comic books. Comic books, particularly those published by DC and Marvel, created a new mythology in post-World War II America, made important commentaries on the role of science, morality, and ethics in the post-modern West, and more recently have come to dominate popular cinema.⁸ As comic scholars have noted, comics are fertile ground for experimental and avant-garde storytelling due to particulars of the medium. Comics are multimodal and consist of both visual and textual elements that are presented sequentially through the page in panels that are separated by gutters. Readers actively interpret these "double narratives of words and images," but also have to "fill in the blanks within these gutters and make connections between panels."⁹ Reading comics is hence "an active productive process" that "involves its

⁶ Frank Benjamin Golley, *A History of the Ecosystem Concept in Ecology: More than the Sum of the Parts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Joel Hagen, *An Entangled Bank: The Origins of Ecosystem Ecology* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); John Kricher, *The Balance of Nature: Ecology's Enduring Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁷ On the rise of modern environmentalism in America see: Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2005); Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the U.S. Since 1945* (Fort Worth: Wadsworth Publishing, 1997); Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*, Revised Edition (Washington: Island Press, 2003).

⁸ Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, eds., *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

⁹ Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March 2008): 452; Dale Jacobs, *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 9.

readers directly,” as they make meaning from these disparate elements.¹⁰ There is a neat symmetry here between how comic scholars have examined the medium and how Fisher has defined the weird. According to Fisher, the weird exists between realities and worlds. The in-between is essential for Fisher. In a similar vein, many comic scholars have focused on the role of gutters in comics. These are the spaces between frames where readers make their own meaning to link together the words and images of the two adjacent panels. Just as the weird exists in the in-between, so much of the meaning of comics exists in these in-between spaces where readers must fill in the action to between one frame and the next.

Although these books were heavily influenced by horror and gothic genres, they also subvert clear categorization by drawing on a multitude of influences while blurring the lines between genres. Horror was an important and successful genre in the 1940s and early ‘50s, but was essentially destroyed by the 1950’s anti-comics crusade. Fredric Wertham’s 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* was the most important expression of this larger anti-comics movement, which stifled the genre’s creativity and growth, and resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954.¹¹ This code self-regulated comic content and effectively killed the genre of horror comics. Much of this crusade focused on fears of juvenile delinquency, but it was also part of a larger paranoia in American culture in the 1950s. Wertham and others also saw comics as inferior literature and looked down on this art form as childish and immature. In the 1960s, the Code was relaxed and horror books experienced a resurgence. Books that focused on swamp monsters became an important part of this genre.

STEVE GERBER AND MAN-THING

In May 1971, Marvel published the first Man-Thing comic, while DC revealed Swamp Thing in June 1971. Comic’s titan Len Wein, who co-created Marvel’s Wolverine and helped revive the X-Men in the 1970s, played a role in the creation and development of both characters. Both characters were truly defined by other creators though. Steve Gerber, an iconoclastic writer who created the cult favorite Howard the Duck, wrote Man-Thing from 1972 to 1975 and transformed the character from a flat one-dimensional swamp monster into a mystical being who bridged the human-nature divide, personified the swamp, and acted as ethical barometer for the human characters in nearby Citrusville, Florida.

Len Wein created Swamp Thing, wrote the first thirteen issues of *Swamp Thing*, wrote at least one issue featuring Man-Thing, and edited both Moore’s run on *Swamp*

¹⁰ Barbara Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* (New York: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2013), xvi.

¹¹ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The Origins and History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994); Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); Fredrick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954).

Thing and parts of Gerber's *Man-Thing* stories. Wein's work with these monsters largely reflected traditional negative ideas about swamps, and the tendency to see swamps as mystical and supernatural places.

Wein established Swamp Thing's origin in his first issue. Swamp Thing was "a muck-encrusted shambling mockery of life . . . a twisted mockery of humanity that can only be called Swamp Thing."¹² Once he was a scientist named Alec Holland, working to cure world hunger, but an explosion in a swamp transformed him into a plant-human hybrid. Wein presents his hero as an inhuman monster seeking to regain his humanity. He is both plant and human, a physical representation of the nature-culture divide, but continually seeks to restore his humanity, thus rejecting his plant-ness. The natural elements of the character are a curse, and the tragedy of the character resides in the fact that he is trapped in a plant body and unable to regain his humanity. Wein writes that Alec Holland dies but "his chemical-enveloped body was somehow nurtured by the swamp, absorbing its filth, assimilating its rot and decay."¹³ Swamp Thing rose "at last from the grasping mire, a misshapen mockery of life—no longer a man- but a Swamp Thing."¹⁴

Wein's swamp is defined by its wetness and hostility to humans. It is a supernatural and inhuman place haunted by monsters and feared by humans. Although this swamp is supposed to be a Louisiana Bayou, it is rather presented as just a generic swamp, with no accurate or detailed flora. Wein describes the swamp as "a swampy desolate marshland forsaken by civilized man."¹⁵ Throughout Wein's ninth issue on the book, he describes the swamp as a "stagnant swamp," a "mire," and a "cursed bog."¹⁶ No humans reside in the swamp, only inhuman and supernatural monsters like ghosts, zombies, aliens, and mutated swamp life. Early issues of Marvel's *Man-Thing* were similar in tone and content. The swamp was a horrible and haunted place, and Man-Thing was a tragic figure who lost his humanity and regrettably became one with nature. Both monsters were born out of traditional tropes about swamp monsters and swamps, but both would be complicated and challenged by subsequent creators.

Steve Gerber redefined Man-Thing through four different titles featuring the character which he wrote from December 1972 to October 1975.¹⁷ Gerber was a subversive, socially-conscious, and off-beat writer who was inspired by the counter-culture and sought to bring a higher level of intellectualism into comics. Gerber may best be known as the creator of Howard the Duck, a satirical character that skewered the comic book genre. He was one of several new comic writers in the 1970s, along with Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin, who were influenced by countercultural trends

¹² *Swamp Thing* 1.

¹³ *Swamp Thing* 13.

¹⁴ *Swamp Thing* 13.

¹⁵ *Swamp Thing* 1.

¹⁶ *Swamp Thing* 9.

¹⁷ Gerber wrote *Fear*, 11-19, which continued directly into *Man-Thing*, which Gerber wrote from issue 1 to 22. *Giant Sized Man-Thing* and *Monsters Unleashed* ran concurrently with *Man-Thing*, and Gerber wrote issues 1-5 of the first book and 8-9 of the second.

and helped breathe new life into Marvel Comics.¹⁸ Despite Gerber's profile in the fan community, his work has received almost no notice from academics.

Although Man-Thing had the same origin as Swamp Thing, Man-Thing was even more of a plant than Swamp Thing. He was a silent hero without speech or even an internal monologue, and was driven solely by the emotions of others. Man-Thing was an empathic monster, drawn to positive emotions and repelled by negative ones. The emotion he hates the most is fear; Gerber's tagline for the creature was "Whatever knows fear, burns at the Man-Thing's touch."¹⁹ Like Wein's Swamp Thing, Man-Thing was described as a "creature of root and muck and slime . . . unclean, malodorous, misshapen."²⁰ "He belongs amid thick, tangled vegetation . . . amid the latticework of leaves and vines that is the Everglades where he was spawned."²¹ Man-Thing, Gerber wrote, "belongs, in short, wherever humans are not. For he is not human . . . but the macabre Man-Thing."²²

While Swamp Thing resides in the Louisiana Bayous, Man-Thing's home was in the Florida Everglades. Specifically, he resided in the cypress swamps in the northwestern sections of the Glades that are today preserved as Big Cypress National Preserve. Gerber's artists portrayed these swamps somewhat more positively; they were not disgusting morasses but neither were they biological wonderlands. They lacked biologically-accurate details, and instead contained just generic flora and fauna. Despite this biological ignorance, Gerber emphasized the ecological value of the Everglades and included several storylines that focused on environmental themes.

Gerber transformed Man-Thing from a generic swamp monster into a key element of the mystical and magical elements of the Marvel universe. He made Man-Thing a more deeply weird creation and portrayed the Everglades as an innately weird place. Gerber revealed that Man-Thing's swamp was actually the Nexus of All Realities, a gateway that connected all the realities in the multiverse. Man-Thing was the protector of that nexus. Other characters immediately recognized the magical importance of this swamp. In Gerber's first issue, burgeoning sorceress Jennifer Kale and her brother leave the town of Citrusville and enter the swamp to perform a magic ritual. Kale explains that swamp is the proper place to cast spells, and asks her brother, "Did you want to cast the spell in grandpa's garage? What kind of atmosphere is that for magic?"²³ In *Fear* 13, strange cultists call the swamp "a cross-roads of realities." The Everglades "are the meeting place for certain terrible mystic forces. Sort of a dimensional intersection."²⁴ Elsewhere, the swamp is described as "The nexus of daemonic forces."²⁵

¹⁸ Howe, *Marvel Comics*.

¹⁹ *Man-Thing*, 19.

²⁰ *Man-Thing*, 19.

²¹ *Man-Thing*, 19.

²² *Man-Thing*, 19.

²³ *Fear*, 11.

²⁴ *Fear*, 13.

²⁵ *Fear*, 14.

A number of Gerber's storylines revolve around the supernatural elements of the swamp. Creatures whom Man-Thing encounters include: Wundarr, a Superman analogue; the ghost of a clown who committed suicide; Spanish conquistadors and monsters guarding the Fountain of Youth; the spirit of a woman seeking revenge on her abusive husband; a young man residing in the ruins of an insane asylum; a David Bowie/Alice Cooper mash up seeking inspiration in the "muck and slime" of the swamp; and a conservative old man who, upset at the decline of traditional values and patriarchal power, transforms into a barbarian and leads a book-burning in Citrusville.²⁶ True to the history of swamps in America, Man-Thing's swamp is also a refuge. He encounters an African-American convict fleeing racist police officers, women fleeing abusive male partners, and outcasts seeking an escape from an intolerant society.

Although these storylines sometimes drew upon weird tropes, it is instead the swamp's status as the nexus of all realities that makes the swamp a preeminently weird place. Gothic, horror, and absurd storylines were a larger part of Gerber's work with Man-Thing, but Gerber's best received and most environmentally-conscious stories were firmly planted in the weird. Gerber reveals that Man-Thing's swamp is the nexus of all realities, a place where the boundaries between dimensions and realities can be breached. Mark Fisher argues that "the weird . . . opens up an *egress* between this world and others."²⁷ The weird "is an irruption into *this* world of something from the outside which is the marker of the weird."²⁸ In several storylines, demonic and evil forces from other dimensions seek to invade Earth through this nexus in the Everglades. The Everglades is presented as not just a landscape that is between wet and dry, but as a place that exists between realities. As Fisher writes, "weird fiction always presents us with a threshold between worlds." It is that "*the between* is crucial to the weird."²⁹

Gerber's longest storyline involves attempts to drain this swamp, a storyline taken from actual headlines. In the early 1970s, environmental activists led by David Brower and Marjory Stoneman Douglas fought the construction of a jetport in the Everglades.³⁰ This would have been the largest airport in the United States; their efforts led to the creation of Big Cypress National Preserve. In Gerber's books, the F. A. Schist Company (an obvious play on the word fascist) builds an airport in the swamp, partly to uncover the Fountain of Youth. Cultists allied with Man-Thing and his ally Dakhim the Enchanter (an immortal sorcerer from pre-cataclysm Atlantis) fear that draining the swamp will weaken the fabric of reality in the swamp and thus allow other demonic dimensions to encroach onto Earth through this nexus. In *Fear* 19, Dakhim informs the reader that the balance of reality was disturbed "at the nexus point of the cosmic forces in the swamp where the man-object dwells. The recent

²⁶ *Man-Thing*, 16

²⁷ Fisher, 20 (emphasis in original).

²⁸ Fisher, 28.

²⁹ Fisher, 28 (emphasis in original).

³⁰ See Davis, *An Everglades Providence*; Grunwald, *The Swamp*.

flurry of activity there—the construction crew draining the swamp to erect an airport on the site—could well result in catastrophe.”³¹ Gerber leans in to the absurd during this storyline, as Dakihm transports Man-Thing, along with Korrek the Barbarian (who manifested on Earth in a jar of peanut butter) and Howard the Duck to another dimension to defeat the Congress of Realities and restore order to the cosmos and to the swamp. Ecological damage to the swamp thus harmed the very fabric of reality. Gerber ties the ecological health of the swamp to its central weirdness. As long as the swamp is whole and wet it is able to maintain this magical barrier. When humans worked to drain the swamp and change its nature, the barriers between dimensions weakened and demonic forces threatened to invade Earth. The ecological health of the swamp kept reality intact. These initial efforts to tie the weirdness of swamps to ecological ideas were more fully explored later by Alan Moore in the pages of DC’s *Swamp Thing*.

ALAN MOORE AND DC’S SWAMP THING

Alan Moore was the vanguard of a new group of comic creators in the 1980s who embraced darker and more complex storytelling. Moore and others, like Frank Miller, subverted the standards of the genre and innovated new story-telling conventions. While Moore might be more famous for his immensely-influential *Watchmen* (1986 – 1987), and *V for Vendetta* (1982 – 1989), *Swamp Thing* was as influential within the comics industry and as celebrated by critics and academics. In his work on the book, Moore fully tackled many of the themes and ideas that Gerber hinted at in his work on Man-Thing.

Moore helmed *Swamp Thing* from January 1984 to September 1987. This work often commented on how horror and gothic storylines had permeated the Western English-language fiction set in swamps, but also illustrated the shifting attitudes concerning nature and wetlands in the second half of the twentieth century. Moore inverted the relationship between the macabre, the weird and the swamp. In his work, the swamp was a beautiful, bright place, full of love and warmth, while humans were the source of the incongruities that turned swamps into weird places. A large number of scholars have noted *Swamp Thing*’s ecological roots. For example, Michael Smith argues that Moore’s *Swamp Thing* is an embrace of Dionysius and notes that *Swamp Thing* is a paradoxical blend of both human and nature. According to Smith, the *Swamp Thing* represents the way that humans have tried to divorce themselves from the natural world.³² This divide between nature and humans is a key element of Moore’s work with the character. Moore shows how the weird is a manifestation of the human-nature divide as *Swamp Thing* works to bridge that divide and transcend his weirdness.

³¹ *Fear* 19.

³² Michael Smith, “Embracing Dionysius in Alan Moore’s *Swamp Thing*,” *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 3 (2015): 365-80.

Moore integrated not just the spirit of modern environmentalism into his story-telling, but specific environmental ideas and ecological concepts. Other scholars have noted Moore's broader environmental themes, and many have connected Moore to the Gothic tradition and examined the science-fiction elements of *Swamp Thing*.³³ These environmental ideas are also seen in the artwork on the book. The artists for Moore's run, Stephen Bissette and John Totleben, accurately portray the flora and fauna of Louisiana's Bayous and eschew stereotypical tropes about dank and dark swamps. These positive perceptions of wetlands reflected the rise of ecology in the late 1970s. These presentations of the swamp were more biologically accurate than previous comics, and include representative and accurate flora- and fauna- like cypress trees.

Moore's work on *Swamp Thing* was undoubtedly influenced by a longer gothic and horror tradition, as many scholars have noted. However, the overarching story and the titular character were made weird through their connections to ecological themes, ideas about wetlands, and changes to the hero's very identity. Moore's second issue dramatically retcons the character's origin. Swamp Thing, like Man-Thing, was a human that had been transformed into a plant-monster. Moore recasts Swamp Thing as a plant possessed by scientist Alec Holland's consciousness and memories. Moore inverts the character's identity. Rather than a monster trying to regain its humanity, Swamp Thing is a human consciousness learning to be a plant. Moore writes that the swamp's plants were "infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realize it is no longer alive!"³⁴ Jason Woodrue, the Floronic Man, exclaims that Swamp Thing is "a plant that thought it was Alec Holland! A plant that was trying its level best to be Alec Holland."³⁵ Swamp Thing was "a ghost dressed in weeds."³⁶ Moore

³³ On Moore see: Annalisa Di Liddo, *Alan Moore: Comics as Performance, Fiction as Scalpel* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009). Works that examine Swamp Thing from an environmental and Gothic perspective include: Maggie Gray, "A Gothic Politics: Alan Moore's Swamp Thing and Radical Ecology," in *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition*, ed. Matthew Green (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 42-62; Michael Bradshaw, "'The Sleep of Reason': Swamp Thing and the Intertextual Reader," in *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition*, ed. Matthew Green (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 121-39; Michael Smith, "Embracing Dionysius in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*," *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 3 (2015): 365-80; Hindi Krinsky, "Mean Green Machine: How the Ecological Politics of Alan Moore's Reimagining of Swamp Thing Brought Eco-Consciousness to Comics," in *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, ed. Randy Laist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 221-41; Francisco Saez de Adana, "The Confrontation between the Classic and the Modern Gothic in The Swamp Thing," in *On the Edge of the Panel: Essays on Comics Criticism*, eds. Julio Cañero and Esther Claudio (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 206-19; Brian Johnson, "Libidinal Ecologies: Eroticism and Environmentalism in Swamp Thing," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore: Critical Essays on the Graphic Novels*, eds. Todd A. Comer and Joseph Michael Sommers (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012) 16-27; Colin Beineke, "'Her Gardiner': Alan Moore's Swamp Thing as the Green Man," *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 5, no. 4 (2011), <https://imagetextjournal.com/her-guardiner-alan-moores-swamp-thing-as-the-green-man/>.

³⁴ *Swamp Thing*; 21.

³⁵ *Swamp Thing*; 21.

³⁶ *Swamp Thing*; 21.

both grounds the character more strongly in weird tropes, and more closely ties the creature to the natural world. In Moore's run, Swamp Thing is not a disfigured human, but rather a plant elemental. Swamp Thing and Man-Thing are both inherently weird creatures. As plant-human hybrids they are composed of things that cannot, and do not belong together.

Moore reconceives the character as both weirder than before—he is a plant with a human consciousness, not a human that became a plant—and more tightly connected to the natural world. Both the essential weirdness, and the deepened connection between the character and nature are used by Moore to expose the weird's connection to the human-nature divide. Swamp Thing's new origin is accompanied by a new *raison d'être* for the character. Whereas previously he was a plant seeking to regain his humanity, he is now a human consciousness learning to be a plant. Moore expertly blends Joseph Campbell's influential *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* with Aldo Leopold's seminal 1949 environmental text, *A Sand County Almanac*.³⁷ Swamp Thing's heroic journey of self-discovery is in fact an ecological education about the workings of ecosystems, food chain and trophic levels, and the roles of plants. At the end of his journey, Swamp Thing learns that thinking like a plant is the true source of his power and the ethical barometer he must follow. Although scholars have noted this book's environmental themes, few have connected the book to specific ecological concepts or to the ideas of Aldo Leopold, perhaps the most important environmental thinker in the 20th century America.

Aldo Leopold's most famous essay from *A Sand County Almanac* is the seminal "Thinking Like a Mountain." In this poetic and moving piece, Leopold recounts a hunting trip he took early in his life, when he was young "and full of trigger-itch."³⁸ Leopold's party was "eating lunch on a high rimrock" when they spied a wolf and her pups, and quickly opened fire "with more excitement than accuracy."³⁹ Leopold remembered that "in those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf."⁴⁰ But this time, Leopold saw in the wolf "a fierce green fire dying in her eyes," and came to a realization that his ideas about nature were entirely wrong.⁴¹ He had assumed, that "because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise."⁴² Leopold saw first-hand the destructions of wolves, but no hunters' paradises emerged. Instead, deer populations exploded, and all the greenery on these new wolfless mountains was eaten. Leopold wrote that it looked "as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise."⁴³ In the end, the deer died as well for lack of food. Leopold argued that "just

³⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949); Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, Special Commemorative Edition (New York: Oxford University Press 1949).

³⁸ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, "Thinking Like a Mountain," 130-33.

³⁹ Leopold, 129, 130.

⁴⁰ Leopold, 130.

⁴¹ Leopold, 130.

⁴² Leopold, 130.

⁴³ Leopold, 130-32.

as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer.”⁴⁴ Humans had to think like a mountain, and understand the intricate and complex food webs that govern ecosystems. Swamp Thing takes a similar journey as did Leopold. Rather than thinking like a mountain, Swamp Thing learns to think like a plant. This journey culminates in a meeting with tree elemental elders and a final confrontation with evil, wherein Swamp Thing reconciles his own weirdness and dual nature, and gains the ecological knowledge he needs to understand reality.

First however, he confronts a series of preliminary threats, all of which build to this cosmic rebirth of an ultimate evil. In issues 35 through 49, Moore inverts the weirdness of the swamp. Rather than being a place that exists in between society and nature, or as a place devoid of civilization and full of the monstrous, the swamp is a refuge for Swamp Thing, while society itself manifests threats and breeds strange monsters. While Gerber turns the Everglades into the nexus of all realities, Moore presents these Louisiana bayous as the serene and natural refuge of the Swamp Thing. The weird dangers and monsters that Swamp Thing faces are instead manifestations of human society.⁴⁵

Many of the monsters Swamp Thing fights outside the swamp are plays on conventional horror monsters. For example, in issue 40, the curse of lycanthropy becomes a symptom of patriarchal oppression of women. In issue 39, vampirism is an infection designed to turn humans into food for a fish-demon. Other scholars, like Maggie Gray and Michael Bradshaw, have noted Moore’s use of Gothic themes. Gray argues that Moore used “an interrogation of the tropes and techniques of the Gothic,” to create an ecological Gothic tale.⁴⁶ Yet these monsters are not just gothic twists, but are weapons used to bring on a transformation of reality. These threats serve as coordinated efforts to induce an atmosphere conducive to the emergence of an ancient evil that could destroy the world. Moore is not only relying on Gothic tropes, but instead twisting them to serve a broader and weirder storyline about human morality and the relationship between humans and nature.

Most of these threats also reflect environmental themes and highlight how Moore connects the human-culture divide to the weird. For example, in an issue entitled “Fish Story,” Swamp Thing battles a fish demon who has turned the local humans into vampiric food-stock. This demon spawned in a reservoir in Rosewood, Illinois and quickly destroys Swamp Thing, who regenerates his body into the biome around Rosewood. He gathers himself “into the heart . . . of the rootweb” and senses “the rushing of the once-damned river.”⁴⁷ Swamp Thing merges with a mountainside, and pushes the nearby river to flow through the reservoir. Restoring the natural flow of the river destroyed this demonic threat.⁴⁸ This, and other supernatural menaces that Swamp Thing confronts, deepen his knowledge about himself and his relationship to the world’s ecosystems, and ultimately prepare him to confront the

⁴⁴ Leopold, 132.

⁴⁵ *Swamp Thing*, 35-47.

⁴⁶ Gray, “A Gothic Politics,” 43.

⁴⁷ *Swamp Thing*, 39

⁴⁸ *Swamp Thing*, 39.

personification of evil in issue 50.

During this build-up to issue 50, Swamp Thing confronts two monsters inside the swamp. Both are human monsters who bring evil into these wetlands, and both are used by Moore to illustrate Western society's alienation from nature. The first monster is a serial killer who calls himself the bogeyman. He dumps victims in the swamp, claiming that "swamps are bogeyman territory. They'll protect me. Probably nobody will find the body for weeks."⁴⁹ To this monster, wetlands are devoid of humans and appropriate places for evil. Swamp Thing soon finds the bogeyman's bodies and chases the bogeyman into a patch of quicksand where he meets his end. Nature itself defeats this human threat. The other monster in the swamp is nuke-face, a man-made monster created by a toxic waste dump in the swamp. Swamp Thing is destroyed by this toxic waste, but soon regenerates as his human allies form an environmental group to clean this toxic site. Swamp Thing's ability to regenerate his body in the swamp illustrates the regenerative power of nature; his discovery of this ability is an important step in his own journey of self-discovery and quest to think like a plant.

After undergoing these trials, Swamp Thing encounters the Parliament of Trees, elder tree elementals who possess important knowledge about Swamp Thing's identity and purpose. Swamp Thing does not yet comprehend much of this knowledge, but it soon aids him in saving all of existence. The Parliament tells him "to avoid power... to avoid anger."⁵⁰ They explain that "power tempts anger, and anger is like wildfire. Avoid it."⁵¹ Instead, they suggest that "if you wish to understand evil, you must understand the bark, the roots, the worms of the Earth."⁵² The Parliament explains the food web to Swamp Thing. They tell him that "Aphid eats leaf, ladybug eats aphid, soil absorbs dead ladybug, plant feeds upon soil." They ask him "Is aphid evil? Is ladybug evil? Is soil evil? Where is evil in all the Wood?"⁵³

Three issues later, Swamp Thing's ally John Constantine assembles a group of DC comics' most powerful mystics and spirits to confront the birth of a new ultimate evil that threatens to destroy all of existence. While the assembled armies of good and evil fight, DC's mystic heroes futilely confront this new ultimate evil. Rather than fighting this threat, Swamp Thing calmly meets this new entity and talks to it. The newly awakened evil, in the throes of an epic existential crisis asks Swamp Thing to "tell me the purpose of evil."⁵⁴ Swamp Thing in turn relates the ecological wisdom he gained from the Parliament of Trees. He recalls that his elders asked him "where evil dwelled within this cycle."⁵⁵ He tells this being that "the black soil is rich in foul decay yet glorious life springs from it, but however dazzling the flourishes of life in the end

⁴⁹ *Swamp Thing*, 44.

⁵⁰ *Swamp Thing*, 47.

⁵¹ *Swamp Thing*, 47.

⁵² *Swamp Thing*, 47.

⁵³ *Swamp Thing*, 47.

⁵⁴ *Swamp Thing*, 50.

⁵⁵ *Swamp Thing*, 50.

all decays to the same black humus. Perhaps evil is the humus formed by virtue's decay and perhaps it is from that dark sinister loam that virtue grows strongest."⁵⁶

This new evil, suddenly awakened by this ecological insight into the nature of death and life in the trophic cycle, merges with a blinding hand from heaven. This dire threat has passed, and "a different light has been cast" on the relationship between good and evil.⁵⁷ Good and evil depend on each other, just as everything in ecosystems are interdependent. Swamp Thing saves all of existence without throwing a single punch, all because he understands and imparts ecological wisdom. Good and evil here, just like water and land in the swamp are two opposite parts of the same whole. The swamp's weirdness, the way it is a place that consists of two opposites that do not belong together, is really just a fact of nature. Because humans are alienated from this nature, they see these divides as weird. Embracing this essential weirdness allows Swamp Thing to understand his true self and gain the knowledge he needs to save existence. Moore's implicit argument is that the weird illustrates the true nature of reality. To understand ourselves, we must understand the artificial dichotomies of the human-nature divide. Swamp Thing, as a personification of that divide, reconciles himself and shows, as Donna Haraway suggests, that understanding the linkages between the human and non-human can lead to a brighter future and a healthier relationship with nature.⁵⁸

Moore continues to explore these themes throughout the rest of his run on *Swamp Thing*. In the "Greening of Gotham" storyline, Swamp Thing forgets these lessons and allows his anger to dictate his actions. Using his power over plants, he turns Gotham into a jungle, and is ultimately killed during a confrontation with Batman and the Gotham city police. Because he has rejected the wisdom of the Parliament of the Trees, he is forbidden from entering the mystical plant dimension known as "The Green," and is unable to regenerate. Instead, Swamp Thing travels through the cosmos and finds a planet where he can regenerate and begins a voyage home, hopping from planet to planet in a science-fiction-influenced series of issues.

Upon his return to Earth, Swamp Thing struggles to comprehend the nature of his power and how he fits into Earth's natural ecosystem, as well as its superhero and human ecosystem. Swamp Thing thinks back to his adventures on the planet Rann, where he restored the planet's ecosystem after a nuclear disaster.⁵⁹ There he saved the ecology of a world; can he now do the same for a destroyed Earth? Swamp Thing thinks "For am I not a god? I could touch all the world with gorgeous wilderness as I touched Gotham . . . [I] could transform this planet to a sphere of colors. . . . I could save mankind. I could do anything."⁶⁰ He realizes that the Parliament of Trees could have done the same thing at any time and chose not to. They are "a dynasty of gods . . . yet

⁵⁶ *Swamp Thing*, 50.

⁵⁷ *Swamp Thing*, 50.

⁵⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

⁵⁹ *Swamp Thing*, 58.

⁶⁰ *Swamp Thing*, 64.

gods who've chosen never to exert their power."⁶¹ Swamp Thing wonders what humans would do if he fixed Earth's problems. Would humans renounce their ways, or would they continue to destroy the earth "safe in the knowledge that I stood on hand to mend the biosphere?"⁶² Swamp Thing concludes "I cannot mend the world without committing greater wrong. . . . Mankind must stand or fall by its merits alone."⁶³ Swamp Thing cannot solve humanity's problems, but rather must stand as an example of how to merge the human and the natural.

Moore's run on Swamp Thing embraces an environmental view of the world which challenges the dichotomy between humans and nature. The weird is dependent on human dichotomies, and Moore illustrates how the human-nature divide is false and harmful to both humans and nature. Swamp Thing, as a plant-human hybrid, conforms to this divide, but in Moore's hands, this hero resolves that divide, transcends his weirdness, and makes important criticisms of human society. Moore reveals that the weird is fundamentally about humans' own alienation from nature. The reason the swamp has monsters is because humans cannot understand it or control it. Humanity's alienation from nature and its fear of swamps is what makes the swamp weird. Perhaps the entire notion of the weird is itself a by-product of a broader alienation from nature.

CONCLUSION

Both Man-Thing and Swamp Thing began their lives as conventional swamp monsters, steeped in traditional tropes and themes about dark and miasmatic swamps full of supernatural horrors. However, Steve Gerber and Alan Moore transformed these characters. Influenced by the ethics and ideas of modern environmentalism, both creators rejected negative ideas about swamps and integrated environmental narratives into their works. At the same time, both of these plant-human hybrids focused on the weird. Gerber transformed Man-Thing into the defender of the Nexus of all Realities, and allied him with powerful sorcerers and absurdist characters like Howard the Duck. Man-Thing was no longer a swamp monster but an empathic creature who defended both the oppressed and the natural balance of reality. Moore took many of Gerber's environmental ideas and pushed them further. Moore's Swamp Thing embraced the ecological value of wetlands and the ethical barometers of modern environmentalism. Swamp Thing's heroic journey taught him to think like a plant, and exposed the true horrors of the world as human-made threats to nature. In Moore's work, the weird is a manifestation of the human-nature divide. Swamp Thing transcends that divide and illustrates how humans are the true source of the horror and discomfort found in the weird.

⁶¹ *Swamp Thing*; 64.

⁶² *Swamp Thing*; 64.

⁶³ *Swamp Thing*; 64.

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