More than Human: A Critical Evaluation of the Intersection of Character and Theme in Mike Mignola's Hellboy

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More than Human:
A Critical Evaluation of the Intersection of Character and Theme in Mike Mignola’s Hellboy

By
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation from the Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Chapter One: An Introduction

Mission and Methods

At his core, Hellboy is defined by his choices and his humanity. According to *The Hellboy Companion* “Hellboy's potency as a character comes from [his] moral foundation, this contrast between his origins and his aspirations” (10). At once, Hellboy exists as a protector of humanity against the monsters of old and as a monster himself. He is biologically both human and demon, born for the purpose of bringing on the start of the apocalypse. Before this can be realized, though, he is adopted and raised by a human parent. His human identity comes to represent choice and free will, while his monstrous heritage represents a predetermined fate and an inescapable nature. This nature versus nurture conflict is played out in several ways in the series, especially in Hellboy's identity as a hero. In this thesis I will show how Hellboy is a heroic character aptly suited to current social and cultural trends through literary analysis of the overarching plot and in the nature versus nurture theme central to his character. Additionally, I will explore how the character of Hellboy influences his world and how he is influenced by his world through the force and will of greater powers.

The *Hellboy* books follow a fairly normal progression in terms of storytelling. They follow the standard conventions of creator-owned comic publications and are an example of normal comic and graphic novel form. The series proper contains twelve collected volumes, called trade paperbacks. While it would be unusual for a novel to abandon the central plot to instead focus on a small and unimportant scene from a character’s past, this sort of digression is not at all unusual to encounter in a comic series.
During the longer “graphic novel” type stories, the stories resemble more closely a plot like that in a long novel, with one story line followed through two or three volumes of work until its conclusion. Shorter, self-contained one-shot stories litter the chronology of *Hellboy*. Some of these stories correlate to the longer stories within the series, and some do not. Any emphasis placed on a single short story is relative to the larger movements in the series, of which there are three. My literary analysis of *Hellboy* the series will follow the three main movements in the series, using content from longer multi-chaptered miniseries and short, single issue one-shots.

The first major movement begins in *Seed of Destruction*, and follows this plot through *Wake the Devil*, the *Right Hand of Doom* short story, and concludes in the brief miniseries, *Box Full of Evil*. This section of the story is concerned with Hellboy discovering his birth as the “Beast of the Apocalypse”, his myriad refusals to go along with his fate, and questions of choice and agency. It is marked by his close association with humanity, and his service on their behalf. The second movement follows Hellboy making his choice to leave the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D.) for the last and final time. It begins in volume five, *Conqueror Worm*, lasts through volume six, *Strange Places*, and concludes with Hellboy’s return to the known world, sometime before the next volume begins. This is a period where he literally walks the earth, adrift and uncertain of his position in the coming conflict between the human world and the world of monsters. The third movement is arguably the most significant to the complete story. It is certainly the longest, lasting through four complete volumes. This movement follows Hellboy for the remainder of his mortal life on earth, and focuses on the greater ramifications of his choice to ignore his destiny. This is the movement that
tackles the mythic, epic traditions in form as well as theme. It begins with *Darkness Calls*, and follows through to the end in *The Wild Hunt, The Storm and the Fury*.

My literary analysis of *Hellboy* the series will follow these three main movements. It will follow Hellboy and examine his character as a hero as he progresses through these three movements. I will do this with close textual analysis and critical evaluation of thematic content as it is embodied in Hellboy and other minor characters. In chapter two I will be analyzing sections from the first movement that deal largely with Hellboy’s identity as an individual, working through issues of his humanity and the question of nature versus nurture. In chapter three I will look at Hellboy as he walks the earth and define the question of where he stands within his world. In chapter four I will conclude my analysis by exploring the ramifications of Hellboy’s identity as a hero through choice rather than fate.

Secondary Literature Review

The Comic Book versus the Graphic Novel

The study of graphic novels in the western world has progressed slowly, as slowly as they have shifted from a simple subculture into a thread of mainstream culture. According to Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics*, this is despite the presence of graphic literature being acknowledged to exist from as far back as 1519. McCloud takes into consideration ancient narratives based only in pictures, as with the picture-manuscript “ocelot's claw” discovered by Cortes or the Bayeux Tapestry, as well as the
sort of combination picture and text offerings from William Blake in his illuminated manuscripts of Dante and his own verse. Will Eisner, an undeniable member of comic royalty, broadly defines a comic as “sequential art.” McCloud's point to prove in giving his history is that the historical precursors to the modern incarnation of comics is that “comics turn up all over when sequential art is employed as a definition” (McCloud 9).

McCloud offers a more detailed definition of comics. He says that comics are “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”

McCloud's definition identifies what is comics, leaving it less clear what the differences are between what makes a comic and what makes a graphic novel. These differences are often hard to define, and not everyone even buys into their existence. The modern definition of graphic novels, and the one widely accepted by readers and creators stems from the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, where Eisner used the term as a way to market a non-traditional comic-based story as something other than a comic book. Eisner's book was more similar to a full-length novel than a comic periodical in form and needed a new term, suitable to describe it, in order for booksellers to agree to carry it. Stemming and building off of this, the term graphic novel soon came to mean a long-form graphic story in book format (Arnold).

The controversy between the two terms comic book and graphic novel is summed up aptly by Jan Beatens in his introduction to *Abstraction in Comics* when he writes of how he will use the term comics in his essay as meaning “both mainstream comics and more highbrow graphic novels” (94). By and large, the distinction between a comic and a graphic novel is a value judgment made by publishers or booksellers based on a
combination of thematic content in and the length of the narrative described. Simply put, the distinction is highly subjective, based on individual cultural values of what is and is not worthy of a higher literary distinction.

This cultural distinction between comic and graphic novel is sometimes met with disdain and confusion even by members of the industry. Neil Gaiman, revolutionary author of graphic novels and comics, speaking from his experience as a writer famously says of the distinction, “all of a sudden I felt like someone who'd been informed that she wasn't actually a hooker; that in fact she was a lady of the evening” (Bender). Where Gaiman implies that the distinction is trivial, Ian Gordon moves a step further and seems to assign it some amount of manipulative insidiousness. He says in Let Us Not Call Them Graphic Novels that “'graphic' novel is a marketing tool that helps comic book producers sell their wares in bookshops rather than on newsstands” (Gordon). While Gordon's thoughts are a step away from Eisner's original meaning behind the term, it is only a small step. Eisner himself popularized the term in part as a gimmick to distinguish his work and sell it to publishers (Arnold).

A Cultural and Geographic Distinction

While comics and graphic novels have not always been given any serious amount of dignity from scholars, attention paid to Alan Moore's Watchmen and Art Spieglemen's Maus has brought considerable focus to graphic novels in the last three decades while leaving a curious gap in the material considered worthy of attention. Curiously, much of the material used as examples in academic articles on comics and graphic novels deal
with European comics (Mikkonen, Beatens). Alternatively, many scholarly approaches to comics and graphic novels, especially educational and cultural criticisms, focus primarily on the reading of Japanese manga in modern society and classroom settings. Works centered on common, or mainstream, comics—superhero titles from big publishers, or successful independently published titles—are much less common.

Mike Mignola’s *Hellboy* seems to fall somewhere in this spectrum. While not a part of the universally accepted works of Spiegelman, Moore, and Eisner, neither is it one of the mass market comics like the superhero title that Fawaz addresses. In the introduction to the first collected edition of the first *Hellboy* mini-series *Seed of Destruction*, writer Robert Bolch says “*Hellboy* is a brilliant example of how to elevate the comic of the future to a higher literary level.” The implication of Bolch is that either *Hellboy* as a work is not yet at a literary level in its quality or that the culture surrounding *Hellboy* is not yet ready to embrace works like comics at a higher literary level. Either way, Bolch is indeterminate about the current status or at least the status of *Hellboy* at the time he was writing the introduction. Where Bolch is reluctant to apply the label of “literary” to *Hellboy*, he fully commits to calling *Hellboy* art. “The total effect of *Hellboy* is that of a true work of art” he says. The distinction here, much like the debate between comics and graphic novels, falls into the realm of cultural criticism, where distinctions between high and low cultures oscillate. Allowing for *Hellboy* to be called art, but not literary art, creates an exact distinction between the two labels, without building a context for the distinction; he offers labels without giving any criteria. Bolch does not fall to this unknown distinction. While he is unsure of the accuracy of the literary title, he does allow
for the possibility that Hellboy is something that is beyond the labels he gives it in his introduction, that it is “evolving.”

Alan Moore also writes on the cultural aspect of comics in his introduction to *Hellboy: Wake the Devil*, announcing it outright as “comic book culture.” Moore also agrees with Bolch in that the culture that he ascribes *Hellboy* as belonging to something that is in flux. “[The culture] is something between a treadmill and a conveyor belt” Moore writes. He extends this metaphor to describe the comics industry and how consumers expect and demand content in the “conveyor belt” and creators are expected to create accordingly. Moore, however, asserts that the actual destination of this conveyor belt is unknown, that it is not the consumers or the creators that control the industry, but the industry itself. He places *Hellboy* at the front of this belt. Like Bolch, he seems to place *Hellboy* at the forefront of the change and movement in the comics industry. Both introductions agree that *Hellboy* is not a part of the traditional comics realm, and yet it is not accepted as a part of the select few comic works, or rather graphic novels, that are accepted and judged “worthy” by mainstream culture.

In the introduction to *Hellboy: Conqueror Worm* filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro ascribes to *Hellboy* roots in the “literary traditions of Machen, Lovecraft, Toth and Kirby.” Frequently the works in *Hellboy* draw upon outside literary tradition or lean heavily upon literary allusion to set mood and change tone. Del Toro seems the accurate individual to remark upon this element considering his role in creating a cinematic adaptation of the series. Drawing upon a tradition of allusion and reference puts *Hellboy* unquestionably at that literary level that Bolch seemed to find so elusive. Del Toro even later describes one of the characters in *Conqueror Worm* as “almost Miltonian.” Del Toro
seems to firmly believe in what both Bolch and Moore were reluctant to step into.

Following this train of thought is Stephen Weiner's chapter in *Hellboy: The Companion* which is titled “The Literary Heritage of Hellboy” and examines the influences of mythology, folklore, pulp fiction, and classic literature in *Hellboy*. He says of the literary allusions:

The Hellboy saga is... full of allusions to classic literature, such as [a]

Shakespearean puppet play... [A character's] recitation of William Blake's 'The Tyger'... a long passage from Poe's 'Ligeia'... Kipling... [and] Hans Christian Anderson... (216)

Weiner further clarifies how these works are used by Mignola in *Hellboy* saying that he uses them “as sources of inspiration and atmosphere rather than untouchable, canonical texts” (Weiner 216).

Stories with Art and Text

Significant attention is paid to the role of the narrative within the comics medium, how it is different or similar to other narrative means, like film and literature. Mikkonen says in “Presenting Minds in Graphic Narratives” that the “interaction between words and images” in film is similar to the way words and images interact in comics (302). However, he goes on to say that film and comics are drastically different as well. He highlights the differences between the mediums, like differences in narration style and form. In film, extended inner speech is more common, and “direct thought presentation” and “thought report” happens more frequently in film narratives than in
comic narratives, while the “medium specific” complexities of page layout alters the narratives of comics in ways that film narratives cannot be altered. Mikkonen seems to assume in this paper that comics are by nature a narrative medium, though he does not assert this. Rather the comics he chooses to deal with are all narrative, as per the topic of his paper.

Aaron Meskin in his article “Defining Comics?” questions this assumption. He wonders if “comics are essentially narrative” (371). Meskin considers whether previous definitions put forth by authors in other papers take into consideration the possibility that comics might not be required to be narrative in order to be comics. He is especially critical of those who assume that comics have a narrative condition, without having any particular data proving this or any reasoning as to why this is. Meskin seems as skeptical of this distinction as many others were skeptical of the comic/graphic novel distinction. He offers the possibility that assuming the narrative condition for defining comics could be a result of the need to differentiate comics from similar graphic arts that are not comics, like images in magazines or lab manuals (371). Meskin's end assertion is that comics, like other media, are “predominantly narrative” but not always “essentially narrative” (372). He further postulates that non-narrative comics are very possible.

McCloud's definition of a comic, referenced by Meskin, is also curiously free of using the term narrative explicitly, and McCloud leaves the continuing implication in his book that comics do not necessitate a narrative, though they often do.

In the same vein, Jan Beatens looks at abstract comics, a small niche in the comics world, in terms of narrative and form in his paper “Abstraction in Comics.” He considers the possibility that abstract comics, while resisting the conventional expectation that
comics and graphic novels be distinctly narrative, remain comics in all other considerations. He puts forth the idea that abstract comics, through the act of abstraction, succumb to the audience's ingrained need and instinct to think and interpret images into a narrative. This is so because, according to Beaten, abstraction and narrativization "resist" and "dissolve" each other, but they do not "equate absence" (95-96). The reduction of a traditionally narrative panel or page into an abstract representation poses no threat to audience interpretation because rendering images, no matter how arbitrary or abstract they may be, into a narrative sequence that makes logical, temporal sense.

Beaten later suggests a similarity in how an audience may interpret an abstract comics to how an audience interprets abstract photography. Much like the comparisons to film, Beaten's analysis of abstract comics in terms of abstract photography is illuminating, though it presents problems as well. While he frames abstract photography in terms of a reduction to the essential, he acknowledges that the difference between abstract photography and abstract comics is in the amount of images the audience is meant to see and interpret. As with photography, abstract comics force a “critical rethinking” in the audience through its very act of abstraction.

Beaten concludes his arguments with distinction between the roles of abstraction and the narrative. Abstraction is a rendering of elements into their most essential form. In comics, this abstraction of elements is fundamentally attached to the idea of a narrative. Abstraction in comics helps to distinguish between “narrative and non-narrative” as well as “degrees of narrativity” (106). In other words, not every element at play in a comic or graphic novel falls into the spectrum of a narrative within the work. Abstraction can help to differentiate and enhance these elements of a narrative. Beaten is very careful to
Wells 12

maintain that narrative and abstraction are two separate domains at the end of his paper. He says that while narrative is a “hegemonic form” it is dangerous and unfair to ignore the “(anti)narrative” aspects of a work. For example, while the whole of *Hellboy* is unarguably narrative, Mignola’s way of alluding to outside works is a decidedly anti-narrative element in the story. Dismissing this element or eliminating it from one's field of study would be a great disservice to the work and the author, and would create an overly simplified view of *Hellboy* that would be simply inaccurate. Additionally, the examples that Beatens gives in his paper are primarily of the image in a comic, and have little to do with text. Abstraction seems to be in the realm of the picture, not the text, with the lingering implication the narrative is waved on to be associated with text. However, this division of terms seems not to be meant to be a division in the works themselves. In another article, *Graphic Novels: Literature Without Text*, Beatens asserts that “it would be absurd to oppose the narrative and the non-narrative” (80).

Meskin and Beaten are in agreement that comics are not limited to the scope of narrative interpretation, though neither is able to answer for what constitutes an entirely non-narrative comic, though they both toy with partially non-narrative works. They both freely admit that non-narrative, or abstract, comics are possible, but actual existence of them is rare and uncommon.

Other scholars seem relatively unconcerned with the existence of narrative and non- or anti-narrative comics. Henry John Pratt, in his essay “Narrative in Comics,” is concerned with only narrative. Pratt gives relatively little attention to non-narrative comics, only saying “Because our typical experiences of comics are of narratives, the default phenomenology of comics reading entails looking for the stories that they tell”
Instead, Pratt spends most of his essay dealing with the issues of the actual narrative of comics.

Within the study of comics, once it was accepted that they had some artistic or cultural value, a prime debate to consider is which part of comics is subordinate to the other, the pictures or the text. The dichotomy hidden in Beatens' paper shows certain dissimilarity between the image and the text in a graphic novel. Although Beatens seems to focus primarily on the image, Pratt addresses both the textual and pictorial elements of comics.

Pratt calls these textual elements the “Literary Dimension” and here Pratt associates literary directly with words (108). He evaluates and defines the forms and ways that words are found in comics, including the word balloon, text box, sound effects, and words within images. He examines how this “Literary Dimension” contributes to the narrative process of comics and why this is so. He says:

The literary aspects of narrative in comics are, as we have now seen, crucial to our ways of understanding characters and the narratives in which they are embedded, particularly temporal relations within the story. (110)

Pratt here is asserting that the narrative of a comic is firmly within the literary field, and so studying a comic in literary terms necessitates studying the narrative of the comic. Juxtaposed to this “Literary Dimension” is what Pratt calls the “Pictorial Dimension.” He assigns to this area the domain of pictures, or rather the images of comics. Pratt further evaluates the ways in which the picture contributes to the comic, for “without pictures, there are no comics” (110). According to Pratt there are key logical needs that are met by
pictures in comics, such as showing who spoke what, setting a scene, and communicating to the reader “emotional and other mental states of the characters” (110).

Pratt is careful to avoid putting one of his dimensions in a position of superiority to the other. He is very quick to note that comics cannot exist in their entirety with only words or only pictures. Scott McCloud, who Pratt is quick to reference, also does not make a distinction between the textual and pictorial elements in comics. Instead, McCloud feels that through the combination of pictures and text comics become a unique form of art. It is through a blending of text and picture that I will analyze Hellboy, with consideration to picture as much as text. Rather than deferring one dimension to the other, I will consider the literary and the pictorial on equal ground, and will be using both to support my analysis.

A Brief Historical Context

Graphic narrative is hardly a new concept unique to the twentieth century. In Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics an overview of historical presence of what can be termed graphic narrative is given to readers, but McCloud does not go into any significant detail about what popular culture calls the comic book itself.

What most people look at today in bookstores and call “comic book” emerged from a series of industry-driven evolutions in the earlier half of the twentieth century. Prior to this, graphic narratives were created and printed in Europe and the US in the Victorian era, though these did not resemble so much a modern comic book as they did children books or silent film sequences, presenting a single image or scene and a completely separate caption explaining the image. What is commonly accepted as being
the first comic book is actually a reprinting of the adventures of comic strip characters as they appeared in newspapers as a collection. They were hardcover, mostly, but gradually a few publishers put out paperback copies of these collections. This form of comic printing was dominant until about 1922 where the paper issue, often likened to a magazine, format began to circulate in monthly releases of collected reprints. Eventually the reprints were replaced by original strips and the strip format was lengthened to emphasize longer, multi-page narratives (Eisner).

These new formats and characters rose in popularity, with monthly issues being sold alongside newspapers at newsstands, depicting “pulp” characters on action-driven adventures in strange and interesting places. When WWII came along, the pulp hero was gradually replaced by the more garish superhero-- Captain America, Superman, Captain Marvel. After the end of the war, though, the public began to lose interest in the propaganda and patriotic entertainment of the era, and interest in comics began to wane. This resulted in a frantic movement from publishers and creators to discover what the next comic trend would be, bringing about the production of a range of books, going from superhero titles, to romance comics aimed at adolescent girls, the return of the more pulp-style hero and his adventures, simple kids’ books, and others.

From the 1940's to the early 1960's the jostle for popularity to get a foothold in the industry came to a head, which resulted in the gradual culling of smaller presses until only a few and the Big Two remained—the Big Two being Marvel and DC, whose bread and butter was the superhero comic. These two companies have dominated the entire comics industry for over seventy years, due in large part to the societal perception that comic books mean superhero, which in turn means a target audience of children and
adolescents. This left a niche in the market for more stories aimed at a more mature audience. This niche was subsequently occupied by the few smaller, independent presses that survived under the force of the Big Two. However, it is only in the last thirty years or so that “indie” comics have really begun to hold their own.

This started in the late eighties and nineties. Following a mass exodus from Marvel due to creative reasons, Image comics began, focusing on the creation and publication of creator-owned properties, and joined the ranks of several other independent publishers. Among these was Dark Horse, the long-time publisher of Mignola’s *Hellboy* and related titles.

The Origins of Hellboy

As an example of original graphic fictions, *Hellboy* offers a nuanced and original story on par with the critically acclaimed *Watchmen* and *Maus*. First published as a miniseries titled *Seed of Destruction* in 1993, the series has been collected into twelve volumes, several anthologies, and has gained two major film adaptations, animated features, and an on-going spin-off series based on characters from the original comics. But there is something more to the franchise than raw market appeal. Success across all these mediums indicates a certain richness in *Hellboy*, something that can be moved to film from text and illustration and still be compelling.

Drawing from masterful literary traditions that have come before, Mignola creates a world and populates it with characters that offer complex interpretations of humanity, freedom, and personal choice. Stephen Weiner examines the influences of mythology,
folklore, pulp fiction, and classic literature in *Hellboy*. Weiner further clarifies how these works are used by Mignola in *Hellboy* saying that he uses them “as sources of inspiration and atmosphere rather than untouchable, canonical texts” (Weiner 216). Use of allusion, both literary and folkloric, is characteristic of Mignola’s work on *Hellboy*. The world and story of Hellboy are rooted, very firmly, to the epic traditions and literary movements of the past. For example, in *Seed of Destruction* one finds oneself in a place eerily similar to Poe’s *Usher* and the Victorian trend of grand, dark, and mysterious houses that hide more than meets the eye. In the later *Strange Places* readers are thrown into a mash-up world of African mythology with many similarities to works by Hans Christian Anderson and Homer. And yet there is something still incredibly original about Hellboy. There was nothing like him in comics before and there has been nothing like him since

The origins of Hellboy begin on a grandly apocalyptic scale that borrows from the Christian tradition and other world mythologies. He is the son of a demon and a human witch conceived in nineteenth century Scotland, and born into the human world for the purpose of leading the apocalypse into the human world. However his early life with its exposure to the world and humanity cause him to act according to his own wishes. Ignorant to his world-ending destiny, he grows up on an Army base in New Mexico under the care of his adopted father. As an adult he joins the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense (the B.P.R.D. hereafter) and fights to defend humanity against the preternatural forces of evil, though his relationship with the organization if often strained.

Works taking place very early on in the series show this contrast and this shift in aspirations very well. In the rather humorous one-shot short story called “Pancakes” a young Hellboy is being coerced into eating pancakes by his military guardians. At first he
resists, claiming to not like them, but after tasting them, he announces “Hey... I love it!” as can be seen in panel one in figure one below. Meanwhile, the demons in hell wail and mourn. “It is the boy,” one says, “He has eaten the pancake.” Another demon replies with “He will never come back to us now.” Lastly, and finally, the demons declare that “Truly this is our darkest hour” (see fig 1).

![Figure 1. Final panel from “Pancakes” (The Right Hand of Doom 3).](image)

The art in this short story is fairly commonplace to the volumes illustrated by Mignola, with reliance on thick, heavy lines and shapes, and a pervading use of shadow and darkness. Often shadow is used within a scene to indicate the intent or moral standing of certain characters.

His early existence heavily influences the choices that Hellboy makes later in his life. The most influential characters in his young life are the soldiers at the base he is raised and the man who adopts him, Professor Trevor Bruttenholm. These are the people responsible for his being called Hellboy. This naming is the most unintentionally significant moment in Hellboy's human life, and will be explored further in the section
covering the *Seed of Destruction* miniseries. By giving him this name these men grant him an identity totally separate from the one prescribed to him by the powers of his creation. Hellboy’s earliest exposure to humanity is one that allows him to have an individual identity. Through his naming and adoption at the hands of Bruttenholm allowance is made for the growth of personal agency.

The longer Hellboy stays in the human world the more he departs from his demonic fate. He is raised by a human man in the human world and so while his nature may be bent towards world-destroying, his nurture is in humanity. However, this is not to say that his fate holds no sway at all over Hellboy. Quite the contrary, the purpose of his birth is an inevitability that is never far from Hellboy’s mind. His origins remain a mystery to Hellboy for a large part of his life. Shortly after *Seed of Destruction*, Hellboy seeks information on his own beginnings after discovering some disturbing details at the Cavendish house in *Seed of Destruction*.

He goes to the place he was discovered as an infant, and while sleeping, dreams about the truth of his beginning. Here, he witnesses his own creation and the truth of his birthright. “The Chained Coffin” (*The Chained Coffin and Others* 70).
parentage and learns the truth of his purpose (see figure 2). He reacts with denial, outrage, and incredulity. He is wont to believe that the destiny he has been assigned is unavoidable and leaves Scotland less comforted than he arrived.

This reaction soon becomes a trend for Hellboy. Whenever his birthright is thrown in his face by whatever monster he is fighting, he responds with defiance and a refusal to succumb to it. His response is usually verbally and physically violent (see figure 3). Here Hellboy asserts “It's my goddamn life, I'll do what I want with it!” while preparing to tear the horns from his own head. In kind, most of his refusals are accompanied by similar words and actions.

![Figure 3. Hellboy refusing his destiny, by verbally asserting his own independence and breaking the demonic horns off of his head (Wake the Devil 107).](image-url)
Chapter Two: On the Side of the Angels

Seed of Destruction

First published in 1993 and collected into a trade edition in 1994, *Seed of Destruction* is the original *Hellboy* miniseries published by Dark Horse. It sets precedence for aesthetic and defines the contours of the fictional universe that the franchise is set in. It also marks the beginning of the first major movement in the larger plot of the series. This movement, as said before, deals with resolving the question of Hellboy’s past and what he ultimately is, hero or demon monster. It opens with Professor Bruttenholm recounting the story of how Hellboy came to be in his care, his known origins (see figure 4).

![Figure 4. Hellboy's first appearance in the human world and subsequent naming (Seed of Destruction 10).](image-url)
By opening the series with this scene, Mignola creates a dichotomy in his main character, the human versus the monster, by setting two paternal figures to Hellboy against each other and comparing them to each other. Professor Bruttenholm acts as the agent of humanity and Rasputin is the agent of monstrosity. Bruttenholm is Hellboy’s nurture, Rasputin his nature.

Mignola’s Rasputin is based on the real historical figure of Grigori Rasputin the infamous adviser to Tsar Nicolas Romonov. He is a character of profound belief and power, marked by his steadfast belief in the gods of the apocalypse, the Ogdru Jahad. As the driving force behind major events of the *Hellboy* universe Rasputin is both the “bad guy” and representative of all the knowledge that Hellboy does not possess of himself. He is sometimes played as a straight antagonist for Hellboy to battle against, as in *Seed of Destruction*, but is also used as a foil to other characters, Hellboy himself and Professor Bruttenholm. Rasputin is the human, surrendering to the will of the apocalypse, serving archaic gods and powers that are as old as creation, and committed to his destiny. Hellboy is the son of a demon, living as a human and fighting for humanity, and refusing to be cowed by any supposed destiny he bears.

This scene also recounts one of the most significant moments of Hellboy’s existence: his naming. Discovered by a group of GIs and paranormal agents on an island off the coast of Scotland in December of 1944, the inhuman infant is named by the man who would become his adoptive father. Trevor Bruttenholm, in the opening narrative, is listening to a recording of the past events, made by himself. “…Hellboy…” he says in the flashback narrative. Then, jumping forward into the present time of the story, his voice continues: “Hellboy. I could not guess then that I was **naming** him…” (Mignola 11).
The art of these few pages reflect the thematic shift that Hellboy undergoes at his name. Prior to his naming, Hellboy is shown in as a shadowed figure, crouching among bright flames and the panel just after his name has been uttered shows his posing in a photograph with the group of people who were a part of his discovery, in full light, clearly visible, sitting at Bruttenholm’s feet (see figures 5 and 6).

**Figures 5 and 6.** Young Hellboy before being named, and young Hellboy after being named (*Seed of Destruction* 10).

Here Hellboy passes from the control of one world into the control of another, with the two men uttering pronouncements on his fate: Rasputin, declaring that his is a miracle that will “set in motions events which cannot now be reversed or undone;” Bruttenholm, giving the first uttering of his name (9-11). It is this early influence that rules most strongly in Hellboy, including the unknown parts of his origins. Rasputin representing his unavoidable destiny through his declaration and Bruttenholm representing individual agency by uttering a name.

On in the significance of these first dozen pages setting up significant events, details, and thematic tone and mood, Bruttenholm makes note of the continuing mystery of Hellboy. He says that “…our best efforts to uncover his secrets ultimately left us knowing little more than we did that first day thirty-five years ago” (11). While “closer to
fifty” years have passed since Hellboy appeared in East Bromwich at the opening of *Seed of Destruction*, little is really known about the greater details of his birth (11). These first few pages manage to skillfully dump a lot of background information on the readers, introduce key themes, give subtle long-term foreshadowing, and establish Hellboy as a character in his own world.

The greater ramifications of *Seed of Destruction* are many. This early story follows a plot type that is relatively unseen in later stories. Other tales of course have villains and themes and significant arc development, but *Seed* offers a uniquely conventional approach to telling the story as a comic. It follows a first chapter introduction, wherein the stage and the players are set, and then it follows a fairly rigid, chapter to chapter progression from scene to scene. This is little to hint at the grander, vaguer stories that come later, and this is about the first and only Hellboy story to follow such a linear progression of time and plot.

Like some great haunted house out of Poe or *Wuthering Heights*, the next scene opens with a splash page of Cavendish Hall, the setting for the rest of *Seed* (see figure 7). This is the first time in the narrative that readers really get a sense of the skillful way that Mignola utilizes allusion in his works. While there is not direct, textual comparison, the art speaks for itself in drawing the parallels between works of literature with huge, doomed houses.
Unknown to Hellboy the Cavendish family is one of the few lingering connections to his early years, for the old Mrs. Cavendish was the medium included with the group who discovered the infant Hellboy fifty years prior to *Seed of Destruction*. Soon after his arrival at Cavendish Hall, Hellboy finds himself once again under the influence of Rasputin and encountering the questions of his origins and his future.

Through his own machinations, Rasputin has returned to the world and intends to push Hellboy into doing what Rasputin brought him into the world to do—unleash the Ogdru Jahad, and end the world. His initial reappearance comes at the end of the first act in the story, and looms in heavy foreshadowing over everything that follows.

This is one of the first occasions where the contradictory points of Hellboy's character are forced into the open. Echoing the opening of the story, Hellboy the person and Hellboy the tool of destruction are juxtaposed, spurred on by Rasputin. By
kidnapping Liz Sherman and ambushing Abe Sapien Rasputin has attacked Hellboy's humanity. He moves to return Hellboy to his state as Anung un Rama and continue the efforts he began with Project Ragna Rok in Bromwich fifty years previous.

The scene of their reunions expresses this conflict excellently. First there is Hellboy, who upon realizing that he failed to protect the human woman, Mrs. Cavendish, expresses guilt and regret (see figure 8).

Figure 8. Hellboy, upon discovering the deceased body of Mrs. Cavendish (Seed of Destruction 48).

“The marks are the same as the marks on the body of my adoptive father” Hellboy says upon discovering the body of Mrs. Cavendish, “I should have known” (48). This statement borders on being a cliché. Hellboy, the hero, helpless to protect an innocent victim, feeling guilty at his failure. However, it could have been possible for Hellboy to put these pieces together sooner. The B.P.R.D. Team was sent to investigate the house in relation to the mysterious death of professor Bruttenholm. While there is no way that he could have known of Rasputin, he had enough knowledge to foresee the monsters reappearing and, tragically, Hellboy only realizes the connection too late. His relationship with the human characters around him, how they succeed and how they go wrong, reflect the humanity in Hellboy himself.

Directly juxtaposed with this revelation is Hellboy's first face-to-face encounter with Rasputin, and all that he represents. “Do not distress yourself, creature,” says
Rasputin, emerging from the shadows (48). In *Seed of Destruction* Rasputin functions as more of a traditional villain to Hellboy’s hero. He represents the dark unknown and the malicious element in Hellboy’s existence. Accordingly, he does not address Hellboy by his human name, but as “creature.” Not only does Rasputin strip Hellboy of his humanity by calling him a creature, but he strips him of his individuality. “Fifty years ago,” Rasputin says, “I summoned you forth from shadow” (49). Hellboy only has identity to Rasputin as a tool to be used, lacking autonomy and any distinguishing morality. His proposal, of course, is this: “Stand beside me. Let me harness the power you hold unknowing in your right hand... or die” (54).

Rasputin's interactions with Hellboy echo the earlier interaction between Hellboy and Professor Bruttenholm. At odds, these two men represent the contradictory sides of Hellboy’s existence. Even the art in this scene is reminiscent of Bruttenholm's naming of Hellboy. Earlier, Hellboy goes from being cast in shadows into the light, and here, Rasputin seems to be melting out of the shadow, while Hellboy stands clear and visible. Name and identity take a sort of empowering effect, and Hellboy retains his humanity through the rejection of Rasputin and his schemes.

Chapter Three follows the shadowed path of where chapter two ended, beginning with Hellboy physically plunging further into darkness the longer his interactions with Rasputin takes. In the opening pages, Hellboy is snatched away from the house proper and taken by an unknown force into the bowls of the house, a basement that seems to be blending into the marsh that the house was built on. It is here in this dark place full of shadow and danger that Hellboy is finally put face to face with his destiny for the first time (see figure 9).
Figure 9. Hellboy and Rasputin facing off, Rasputin revealing his role is Hellboy's origins (Seed of Destruction 59).

Here Hellboy bids Rasputin speak, and is told “You were called to stand beside me at Ragna Rok—to command the power I shall unleash upon the world. Here is your purpose. Here is your Destiny” (59). In this scene it becomes very evident the epic and grand traditions that Hellboy moves in. The scene is reminiscent of the traditional step in the hero’s journey, the call to action—albeit as an inverted example that manages to subvert not one, but two aspects of the call to action. First is the call itself. Usually this is an invitation to become a hero, to start a quest to achieve some good in the world, as in the case of the Ancient Greek heroes of Classic mythology. Instead Rasputin is offering
Hellboy a chance to be a “hero” and help him lead the forces of the apocalypse on earth. The second inversion does not become evident until Hellboy’s second refusal of the call to action.

It is usual for the hero to decline the call the first time around, and in so doing the hero causes suffering for himself or his loved ones and is then resolved and has reason to take up the call the second time it is offered to him. Hellboy declines Rasputin’s first offer with a clear “I think I’ll pass” (59). His refusal is simple, and almost out of hand, as though the revelations of his fate are not as significant as they should be. Perhaps it is less that the revelation is insignificant so much as it is unthinkable to the individual that Hellboy has become. Rasputin’s second offer is less an offer and more of an ultimatum. Accordingly Hellboy’s refusal is more aggressive as he responds with “Go… To… Hell…” (79). Following the trend of the second call, Hellboy has grown more resolved after refusing the first call, but instead of becoming resolved to accept he becomes more resolved in his refusal.

Hellboy’s bond with humanity and his teammates is reiterated in chapters three and four as well. He is attacked by one of the frog monsters that appears earlier in Seed of Destruction and it is revealed to him that like the other monsters it was once a man. This one, revealed to be another member of the arctic expedition that Bruttenholm was a part of, evokes a regretful response in Hellboy. “The thing that used to be Sven Olafsen,” he says in his monolog, “is about as tough as anything I’ve come across. A piece of me wants to think that’s maybe because I know this is all that remains of a man. Maybe an innocent man” (67). When later Hellboy must destroy the monster that is Olafsen, he apologizes for what he must do to whatever part of the human man that still remains (see
Additionally, Hellboy shows his concern for his human teammate, Liz, when she is forced into the confrontation by Rasputin, taken over by the wizard, her pyrotechnic abilities being drained to boost his power. He attempts to dissuade Rasputin from including Liz in the fight, saying that she has no connection to “… where I came from… How I got here…” (77).

Figure 10. Hellboy reluctantly destroying Sven Olafsen (Seed of Destruction 88).

As well as showing his kinship to humanity, Hellboy’s disclaimer to Rasputin indicates that while Hellboy has allied himself with the human world and is devoted to his friends and comrades, he also sees himself as separate from them. He does not tell Rasputin that Liz has nothing to do with their fight, he tell him that she has no connection
with his inhuman origins. “She has no… connection to me” he says, to his origins and his new found destiny. Hellboy is separate from humanity, and refuses his own monstrosity.

However, while he refuses his monstrous side, he does not deny its existence. From the beginning Hellboy acknowledges a sense of familiarity with Rasputin and what he says. “That voice…” he says when Rasputin first appears to him, “I know that voice” (48). Since the word “know” is in bold we know that it carries significance, stressing that Hellboy has some innate knowledge of Rasputin and his character. Later he finds Rasputin’s “Strange and mad words… somehow familiar” (see figure 11). Again, Hellboy’s almost instinctual awareness and knowledge of Rasputin is stressed, indicating a sort of primal relationship between what Rasputin says, his knowledge, and Hellboy as a character.

Figure 11. Hellboy and his connection to Rasputin’s words (Seed of Destruction 86).

The first two times that Hellboy refuses his “destiny” according to Rasputin, it reminds one of a step in an epic tradition, but in the third and final refusal it feels
different. This third refusal, near the end of chapter four and the end of the story, has the power dynamics shifting a little between the two characters. This time it is Hellboy in a position of power over the defeated Rasputin and Hellboy who is responsible for the majority of words in these panels. Here he finally elucidates his decision to refuse his destiny: “Maybe you were telling the truth. Maybe it was you who brought me to earth. But I didn’t ask to come, and I don’t owe you for the favor” (99). In speaking this Hellboy brings his refusal from the realm of epics and quests into a place that feels more similar to a temptation story, like a fable or folk story. The three times tempted, and three refusals carries something almost Arthurian in it, like in Gawain and the Green Knight. Hellboy moves from a solitary, iconic hero role into a more romantic, human character.

The piece of this final confrontation that Hellboy carries with him, after Rasputin has been defeated and after the doomed home of the Cavendish family has sunken into the marsh, is the lingering mystery of his origins. His purpose has been revealed to him, but no light has been shed on his beginnings beyond that. The story closes with Hellboy, haunted, remembering Rasputin’s part words—“If you kill me you will never know who you are! You will never understand the power inside you” (104). With an emphasis on the remaining mystery of Hellboy and the lingering threat of Rasputin returning *Seed of Destruction* ends.

*Wake the Devil*

The significance of *Seed of Destruction* is many. The introductory story to the *Hellboy* saga establishes the world, the characters, the conflict, and introduces many of
the over-arching themes that permeate following works in the franchise. The only thing that *Seed* doesn't firmly set into place is the form of the following works. *Seed* and several other earlier works have nebulousness about them, something a little rough and unfinished. The level of attention paid to external forces, the character of Rasputin, and the relatively little detail paid to the development of minor elements in *Seed* is out of place when compared to later works.

The second miniseries in *Hellboy*, *Wake the Devil*, is similarly rough. It introduces many important elements to the series, as well as several characters that become majorly significant later on. However, it approaches the plot in a manner that is at once closer to what one finds in later works as well as radically different. One of the most pleasant things about reading the entirety of *Hellboy* is the lack of loose ends. By the time readers reach the conclusion in volume twelve, *The Storm and the Fury*, the myriad elements of earlier stories has all been neatly tied into a bigger plot and there is very little left to wonder about. The few threads that aren't tied up by the end are all, coincidentally, from *Wake the Devil*.

*Wake the Devil* takes a curious, almost full-immersion approach to the plot, dwelling on a group of characters that do not make an appearance again in the series, and addressing a primary foe that has no more importance than that of a plot device. More than any other story, *Wake* draws on the pulp genre for pacing and structure, and at times does not feel like a graphic novel so much as it feels like film or television. Perhaps this is in part due to the developing nature of the series at the times *Wake* was written, or perhaps it was something about this particular story that makes it so anomalous. Mignola says in a letter at the end of the 2003 edition of *Wake the Devil* that this “is the most
ambitious comics project I've ever attempted” in terms of story scope and structure (120). Opinions may vary on whether or not Mignola was particularly successful in *Wake the Devil* as a comics endeavor, though it can be generally agreed that the unique style that *Wake* is told in makes for a remarkable if incongruous read.

As mentioned before, there are some important characters and elements that are introduced in *Wake*, three in particular that should be mentioned for future reference in this project. First is the first appearance of the character that later becomes known as Roger the Homunculus (see figure 12).

**Figures 12 and 13.** The first appearance of Roger the Homunculus in *Wake the Devil* and Hellboy's first encounter with Hecate in the same (*Wake the Devil* 64 and 70).

Roger becomes both plot and theme significant in his later appearances. He is an echo of all that Hellboy is, with great attention paid to his naming and the significance of the personal choices that he makes in determining his own existence. The second is the iteration of Hellboy refusing his call to destiny, here made by the goddess Hecate (see figure 13). This pervasive image is one that appears continually, the significance of which has been previously discussed. Third, this element become not so important in the
Hellboy series proper, but in the stories surrounding the B.P.R.D team the character of Abe Sapien carries hints of drastic similarities to Hellboy, very similar to how the character of Rasputin function in the earlier Seed of Destruction.

Abe and Hellboy both live under the ambiguous threat of a great eventual destiny that neither fully understands. Here, Abe is witness to the vague and ominous threats from a decapitated head, which are not fully explained until a feature story in the spin-off B.P.R.D series. Like with Hellboy, these words appear again and again, following the character in multiple appearances in a leitmotif way until said threats of destiny are seen to fruition.
Chapter Three: Adrift and Uncertain

Conqueror Worm

*Conqueror Worm*, volume five in the original trade publication of the *Hellboy* series, is significant in several ways, both thematically and in terms of plot. It marks the beginning of the second movement, the walking the earth section. Additionally, it signifies the maturation of Mignola’s allusive element in the series, as well as further examines the idea of Hellboy choosing his path and his allegiance. It brings together the thematic threads that lace earlier stories and sets the stage for the final moment in the series.

The premise of the story in *Conqueror Worm* is that sixty years past Hunte Castle in Austria was home to top secret experiments in the Nazi space program. The castle was ruined when a rocket launch that sent a capsule into space was sabotaged by Allied forces. Recent activity at the site comes to the attention of the B.P.R.D. and they send Hellboy and Roger the Homunculus to investigate.

The story begins with a long passage quoted from Edgar Allen Poe’s *Ligeia*, which is where *Conqueror Worm* takes its name. Throughout the miniseries, *Ligeia* is referenced and quoted again several more times, usually in such a way that brings attention to an important plot point or significant thematic material.

More than other Hellboy stories, Conqueror Worm shows the influence of pulp and science fiction on the *Hellboy* universe. The external conflict of the plot centers around “space ghosts” and this is the first major appearance of the undead pulp magazine
hero, Lobster Johnson. Lobster Johnson was a childhood hero of Hellboy and is an in-universe example of how the young Hellboy was shaped and inspired in the human world. He later gets his own spin-off series, but in *Conqueror Worm* he is a looming figure over Roger and Hellboy, acting as a supernatural embodiment of justice.

Internally, both Hellboy and Roger face difficult problems and must make important choices about their rights to exist and act independently among humanity. Roger the Homunculus, who first appeared in *Wake the Devil*, is shown to be very similar to Hellboy, who gave him a name in the same manner as Professor Bruttenholm names Hellboy. On the page, he is an echo of the conflict that has existed in Hellboy, the mystery of his origins and the question of accepting or denying the destiny that others assign you.

At the beginning of the story the B.P.R.D. has placed a bomb inside of Roger as a safeguard against any future dangers, referred to as “a sort of fail-safe device” (14). Roger's earlier appearance in the series features violence against human characters, specifically pyrokinetic human agent Liz Sherman. The B.P.R.D. uses this as justification for the bomb. Hellboy initially responds with a shocked “Excuse me?” and replies to the explanation with

But how many lives did he save, including mine, when he melted his brother, the giant human-fat monster? Then didn't he voluntarily zap Liz back to life—at the cost of his own? … when [Liz Sherman] was eleven years old she burned thirty two people to death... when are you going to put a bomb on her? (15)

Manning, a representative of the B.P.R.D. administration, responds by saying “Don't be ridiculous. Liz Sherman is human. Roger is not” (15). This shows that much like Hellboy
himself, it is not Roger's suitability to act that is questioned, but his humanity, or lack thereof. He is “expendable” when human agents are not (15). Hellboy's response, marking the end of this scene is “You know, I'm not human either, remember? When are you guys gonna put a bomb on me?” (see figure 14).

![Figure 14. Hellboy's parting word to Agent Manning (Conqueror Worm 16).](image)

This exchange brings to the surface Hellboy's previous struggle with his existence and humanity, explicitly showing the tension of the conflict for the first time. The visual elements in this panel reflect this, with Hellboy cast in shadow, his face in darkness, standing in a doorway. His position in the door, between two places but in neither one, sets the tone for the rest of the graphic novel and the entire second movement, pitching it as one of uncertainty and darkness.

Roger and Hellboy are guided up the mountain to Hunte Castle by a local woman who is not what she seems. On their way up the mountain, they encounter proof of paranormal activity in the form of ghosts, uncanny animal activity, and an ominous old man who warns the trio to turn back. Unsurprisingly the activity at Hunte Castle is part of
a larger and elaborate trap, intended to jump start the apocalypse. Both Hellboy and Roger are attacked, resulting in Roger falling and Hellboy being knocked unconscious after a brief exchange. Roger, echoing the sentiment of Agent Manning in the opening scene, insists that Hellboy save “the girl” rather than himself (see figure 15). The visual composition of these panels is dramatic with high contrast between light and dark. The first panel is relatively light, but as Roger comes closer to falling, each panel gets progressively darker until the last, which is dominantly black.

Compared to the earlier use of light with Hellboy, the darkness here seems to also indicate uncertainty, as well as the internalized conflict within each character. The issues of life and existence are brushed over in the first movement, while Hellboy is firmly on the side of humanity. As the issue of Hellboy's humanity is brought to the forefront, questions about the worth of one life over another are explore through Roger as a character who embodies these same sorts of themes. Through watching Hellboy's reaction to Roger, one can see how this conflict is played out in Hellboy himself. It is not the possibility of Roger's death that upsets Hellboy, but Roger's surrender to valuing a human life over his own.

After this, the story jumps between the individual plots for Roger and Hellboy. Recovering from his fall, Roger comes across Lobster Johnson, who acts as his new
guide up the mountain, this time through underground caverns that once hosted Nazi experiments. In one of these caverns, an old experiment affects Roger negatively, draining him of the electricity that keeps him alive. Weakened, Roger realizes his own identity and worth, a scene very reminiscent of Hellboy circa *Seed of Destruction*. “No,” he says, “I will not let these things take my life... Just machines... Whatever I am, I am more than just a machine” (51-52). Much like Hellboy, Rogers choice here comes to define him as a character, his choice to fight for his continuing right to live. “I am” he says, and though Roger does not claim humanity for himself he shows a sense of self-worth, that he values himself enough to choose life for himself, not for another human life.

Hellboy wakes up back at the castle and comes face to face with his own choices. He wakes up to find a man in chains, who turns out to be an alien connected to the cosmic forces of the universe. This man admits that he was present on the day that Hellboy came into the human world, saying “I saw something in you... Free will. The chance that you might break the bounds of fate and choose a life...” (57). His last words to Hellboy are “To be other than human does not mean to be less” (see figure 16).
Figure 16. Hellboy and the alien's last words (Conqueror Worm 60).

Centrally located in the story and the series, this statement cements Hellboy's move away from the human world he grew up in and more into a state of uncertainty, motivating his eventual choice to leave the B.P.R.D. and search for himself. It echoes the sentiment shown by Roger as well, that humanity is not necessarily the only element in determining personhood. This tone follows the two into the confrontation with the Nazi scientists and their space monster, and through to the end of the graphic novel.
Figure 17. Hellboy quitting the B.P.R.D. over Roger and the bigger questions of his future 

*(Conqueror Worm 122).*

The apocalypse space monster is defeated, and Roger and Hellboy return to the B.P.R.D. base camp, where Hellboy announces his decision to leave the agency (see figure 17). “It's not just the bomb on Roger,” Hellboy tells Kate Corrigan, a long time friend in the B.P.R.D., “it's all this other stuff,” referring to his own struggle with his growing awareness of the “bounds of fate” in his own existence (122). Conqueror Worm forces Hellboy into a position where he has to face his own history and reevaluate his choices.
Figure 18. Hellboy and Kate Corrigan, as Hellboy leaves the B.P.R.D. after the events at Hunte Castle (Conqueror Worm 123).

Figure 18 above shows Hellboy's final appearance in Conqueror Worm and indicates his position has changed from the beginning. Like the earlier images in Worm and earlier graphic novels in the series, Mignola uses light and shadow to create tension and emphasis. Hellboy from the beginning of the story is cast in shadow, he is in an in-between place and uncertain of what his position in the world should be. In the last panel of the novel, Hellboy is shown clearly, free from shadows and walking towards a lightly colored landscape. It is B.P.R.D. agent Kate Corrigan who is the one in shadows, which seems to indicate that Hellboy has made a good choice in leaving, letting go of some of his uncertainty.
Uncertainty follows Hellboy from *Conqueror Worm* into the stories of his wondering the world, collected into volume six called *Strange Places*. As *Worm* shows Hellboy's break with the human world, one of the things that the stories in strange places explores is the question of which side of the apocalypse question he will ally himself now. This is the question that is eventually answered in the third movement, where the end game plays out.

The question is posed thus—after breaking with the B.P.R.D. is Hellboy going to continue to resist his fate or will he surrender to it and help bring about the end of the world? One encounter with Hecate explores this question expertly, and also shows Hellboy's response to it.

*Figure 19.* Hellboy and Hecate speaking in a moment of calm in “The Island” (*Strange Places* 69).
Hellboy initially tries to refuse Hecate on the same grounds as in their previous confrontations, but Hecate responds with “You are different now.... The Bog Roosh offered you oblivion. You chose life” (see figure 19). The Bog Roosh, villain from a previous story, planned to avert the end of the world by destroying Hellboy's physical body, making peace with his enemies, and trapping him forever in her underwater lair. Hellboy, though, disagreed and fought to escape, even though the apocalypse would have been averted by this solution and humanity spared suffering.

This interlude shows again the importance of individual choice in Hellboy's character, and more importantly, independent choice. As a character emerging from multiple heroic traditions and being created in a world full of pre-determined events, the thing that makes Hellboy an excellent hero for the modern canon is his continued independent agency, that his action heroism is through choice, not force.
Chapter Four: The End Game

Darkness Calls

The third movement in Hellboy begins with his return from his wanderings in the second movement to the human world, though this time he settles in England, rather than returning to America and the B.P.R.D. Because of this, his return lacks any sort of symbolic statement. This act does not tell readers if he has rejoined the side of the angels, and decided to fight for humanity once again. The question of where he stands, as posed in his adventures while walking the earth, remains unanswered by his return and so it must be answered by Hellboy's choices and actions in the event following his return. He is still in-between and uncertain at the beginning of Darkness Calls, but this slowly morphs into a renewed dedication to his identity and agency. Just as the first movement is threaded with his inner conflict and the second movement is laced with his uncertainty, the third movement is dominated by Hellboy’s internalized debate over his position in the world and brimming with a sense of finality as his epic reaches the end game in The Storm and the Fury.

Darkness Calls, the 2007 miniseries collects as volume eight of the Hellboy series, marks the beginning of the third and final movement, wherein the dark forces haunting his past all merge into a single storyline, and Hellboy is forced to finally confront directly the choices he has made. A theme that bridges the second and third movements is the uncertainty as the heart of Hellboy’s personhood. By leaving the B.P.R.D in Conqueror Worm Hellboy seems to cut his ties with the human world, an idea
that he is confronted several with during his wanderings. Upon his return to the human world, the consensus among the monsters and creatures of the world is that in severing his ties with the Bureau, Hellboy has somehow changed sides in the conflict.

The witches of the world, whom Hellboy formerly fought against, are gathering in order to offer Hellboy a new place as their ruler (see figure 20). Through his demon father, who formerly ruled the witches of England, and through his mother, who was a witch herself, Hellboy has “more right to be king” than any other. Their offer is refused, of course, and war is declared between Hellboy and the witches.

**Figure 20.** The witches of England offering Hellboy kingship (*Darkness Calls* 48).

Perhaps most interesting in this exchange is the claim of kinship that the witches make against Hellboy, calling him “cousin” (see figure 21). Prior to this, the link between
Hellboy and the monster world around him has been through his father, the demon, rather than his human mother. Given the enmity that Hellboy feels towards witches, he does not respond kindly to their address of kinship. Through the one part of his bloodline through which he has a complete claim to humanity he is still linked to the “wider world” beyond his upbringing. This is interesting because the exchange reiterates the uncertainty of Hellboy's position in the world. Like his earlier encounter with Hecate, the groups and individuals Hellboy previously opposed are curious to know where he stands. Also like the earlier encounter with Hecate in Strange Places, the witches assume too much of Hellboy and are rebuked.

Determining good and evil becomes more difficult in the third movement. There is no longer any clear alliance with a larger organization that announces his moral standing in the world. There is only the significance of action left to help determine where Hellboy as a character stands. While confronting the witches, Hellboy shows a reluctance to resort to immediate violence, instead showing a modicum of tolerance for them when in previous encounters he would not. He does not agree to the offer of peaceful departure. Hellboy still maintains an antagonistic stance against the witches, reluctant to let go completely of their old enmity.

Figure 21. Hellboy and the witches declare war (Darkness Calls 49).
The declaration of war does not go unpunished, and Hellboy leaves the meeting only to be transported to the mythic Russian world ruled by the mythic witch the Baba Yaga, one of his oldest enemies. Here, Hellboy, beset of the forces of the witch, encounters both enemies and allies, none of whom are purely human. These encounters debate all the old questions of identity and humanity, and through them some of the uncertainty that has loomed over *Conqueror Worm* and *Strange Places* is cleared away.

Koshchei the Undying, a figure from Slavic folklore and in this case enslaved to the Baba Yaga, tells Hellboy during their battle “I was wrong to call you devil. You’re as good a man as I was in my day” (110). He identifies Hellboy as a man rather than as a devil, which is seemingly in accordance to Hellboy's own perception of self, but he does also qualify that Hellboy is only “as good a man as [Koshchei]” who is a villainous figure. This is another example of how blurred the lines are becoming between human and monster, and good and evil.

Slightly later, the Baba Yaga herself inadvertently reveals that to her, Hellboy is still aligned with the human world (see figure 22). “The world of Men is finished with him,” she says, “There is no place for him to go!”
Figure 22. The Baba Yaga to Koshchei the Undying (Darkness Calls 116).

While she admits that the human world, “the world of men,” no longer is concerned with Hellboy, she seems to be implying that Hellboy may not be so ready to relinquish his ties with the human world. The connection is uncertain still, but it still exists.

As mentioned earlier, the significance of action is a dominant theme in Darkness Calls, centered around Koshchei and the character of Vasilisa, a child based on another figure from Russian folklore. Koshchei kills Vasilisa, who is aiding Hellboy and showing him an escape back to the human world. She is an image of good and light, who has “always tried to be good” (99). Though like Koshchei and Hellboy himself, she is not entirely human anymore, she retains her own agency, and continues to do good even in the face of the Baba Yaga. She is contrasted directly to Koshchei who is also tied to the Baba Yaga, but who has let his own will be sublimated until the only thing left are brief flashes of individual will and actions. Through these two the lines between good and evil seems to be shifting from human and inhuman more to fits along the line of those willing
to act and those unwilling to act. This shift continues through the rest of the third movement and the rest of the series.

*The Storm and the Fury*

*The Storm and the Fury* is the penultimate volume of the *Hellboy* series, collecting the last six issues that cover the story of the apocalypse a long time in the making. This book ends the third movement and the series as a whole. It follows the themes of humanity and choice to their final conclusion, which leads to the final death of Hellboy himself.

Alice, a character introduced in a one-shot early on, reappears in the previous story, volume eleven *The Wild Hunt*, and plays a pivotal role in these final stages of the story. She is a tool for Queen Mab, the fairy queen, a presence that guides Hellboy from his drunken spiral out of control back towards a more righteous path which ends with the revelation that through his witch mother’s bloodline, Hellboy is actually the rightful king of Great Britain, Excalibur and all.

Alice, much like Vasilisa in *Darkness Calls*, acts as a sort of reinforcement of the themes exemplified in *Hellboy*. In this example, the theme being explored is the choice an individual can make in the face of destiny. Alice had been granted guardianship of Excalibur and as a servant of and believer in Mab, the fairy queen, wants Hellboy to take it up and assume kingship. When he declines the sword, it is revealed that Alice has been bound to the sword, much like the figure of The Lady of the Lake in the original
Arthurian legends. “It was put into your keeping for a reason,” says a disguised Mab “it’s for you to decide what’s done with it” (94).

It is just after this revelation that *The Storm and the Fury* picks up, with Hellboy debating the virtue of this inheritance, much like he debates the destiny his demonic father gave him. He wonders if this fate is any better an end than his other options. This inner conflict is summarized in a flashback scene to New Mexico in 1941 where, significantly, a young Hellboy and Professor Bruttenholm have a brief discussion about monsters and good men (see figure 23).

*Figure 23.* Professor Bruttenholm and Hellboy at the New Mexico Base in 1944 (*The Storm and the Fury* 49).
The conversation begins with the young Hellboy asking “I’m not a monster am I?” and Bruttenholm replying “Of course not. You’re a good boy...” Young Hellboy then responds that he wants to be a good man like “The Lobster… [who] doesn’t have any powers or anything. He’s just a guy but he fights the bad guys and sometimes they’re monsters…” (49-50). This statement echoes a sentiment expressed time and time again by Hellboy in this series, his conviction in his identity as a “goody guy.” At the heart of this issue is again, the choice that Bruttenholm provided for Hellboy, the chance to be human and not a monster, or more simply, the option to choose what he was to become. This scene is the fulcrum with which Hellboy overturns any and all thoughts of preordained destiny. Offered a crown and leadership of an army, he simply says “Can’t do it” (56). And after saying goodbye to Alice, Hellboy goes to face the Dragon on his own, according to his gut feelings on the matter.

There are several interesting facets to the ensuing battle. One is Hellboy’s encounter with the Baba Yaga, wherein he agrees to the loss of his eye. He gives his eye in trade, to replace the one that he himself took years ago, and to be brought to the Dragon. Considering his previous combativeness with Baba Yaga, Hellboy’s willing trade with her shows that he has shifted again in his view of himself, much like the change that occurs in *Conqueror Worm*. He no longer considers himself in direct opposition to the world and powers that the Baba Yaga has represented in their past encounters. He has once again gone through a shift in his moral center, back to his humanity.

Another is that this final fight is the physical action that goes with the internal conflict of identity that is essential to the character of Hellboy. The questions that arise in the first movement, the uncertainty of the second movement, all come to a head in the
penultimate scene and the all—But rather than being true to any notion of destiny it is announced that “Whatever you were meant to be—you are too late!” (103). Whatever various roles and destinies his birth and life place on him, at the very end of his story, Hellboy is alone. He is not the hero his maternal blood wanted him to be, and he is not the herald of doom that his father’s bloodline would have him be. Rather, at the end, Hellboy remembers his human father, and he remembers choice. And he chooses to face the Dragon/Nimue alone at the end.

This ultimately results in Hellboy’s triumph over the Dragon, but this comes at the loss of his own life. The close of the third movement and the series is one of uncertainty. The last lines of the book are these: “The future of England is decided—transformed… by Hellboy’s sacrifice and blood… All else is a mystery” (see figure 24).

**Figure 24.** Discussing the future of a world without Hellboy (*The Storm and the Fury* 161).

The only certainty is the actions and choices of the characters at the end of the series. “All else” which is implied to include future apocalypse situations, and the eventual
destinies of the various powers at play in the greater universe, are unknown. The significance of Hellboy as a character lies totally in his identity and his choice, expressed through themes of exploring humanity and the idea of fate or destiny.

A Brief Conclusion

From the beginning to the end, Hellboy is a hero defined by the choices that he makes as an individual. He does not conform to the will of more powerful characters, or to the very real concept of destiny. The he embodies themes of humanity, existence, choice, and sacrifice, which are echoed in the actions of those characters closest to him. From the opening of his series in *Seed of Destruction* to his last mortal moments in *The Storm and the Fury* Hellboy acts as a hero very suited to modern epics—Hellboy maintains his agency and free will until the very end. It is not through an outside will that he goes to meet his destiny, but his choice and on his own terms. This makes him a uniquely suitable heroic character for the twenty-first century because his traits as a hero cannot be defined by a single set of values. The presence of so many world cultures and literary traditions make it hard to define Hellboy as one single thing. He carries traits of the Homeric wanderer as in *The Island*, the gunslinger of the Old West, an Arthurian knight like with *The Wild Hunt* and *The Nature of the Beast*, and the cape-wearing superhero. The best way to define him as a hero is not in the traditions that his characters invokes, but by the choices that he makes as an individual.
Works Cited


