

GRANT  
MORRISON  
*the early years*

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Timothy Callahan

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## ***Grant Morrison: The Early Years***

by Timothy Callahan

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# Introduction

Comic books and graphic novels have received more critical attention in recent years than ever before, yet most studies of sequential narrative focus on the big picture – they tell about the history of the medium, or provide a biographical overview of a major creator, or provide a synopsis of various important storylines.

In this book, I'm doing something different.

I'm taking a look at a few works by comic book writer Grant Morrison, and through close textual analysis, I'm going to show what the stories are *really* about. I'm going to show you how to read his work by pointing out the recurring patterns and motifs. I'm going to show you how he explores a few dominant themes again and again. I'm going to show you what he's doing with words and images to challenge the very foundations of narrative. I'm going to show you what these comic books reveal about life.

My focus is the work from Grant Morrison's early career. He burst onto the comic book scene and produced a series of masterpieces within a few short years. Between 1987 and 1992, he published *Zenith*, *Arkham Asylum*, *Animal Man*, *Batman: Gothic*, and *Doom Patrol*, all of which deserve a close, analytical reading – the type of reading I'll provide in these pages. All of these works are, basically, super-hero comic books, and super-hero comic books get little respect. They dominate the shelves of the local comic book stores, but they aren't taken seriously in the critical community. I hope this book shows how much super-hero comic books have to offer, especially if they're written by a master.

# *Zenith*

*Zenith*, an epic story told in four distinct Phases over the course of five years, is not only Grant Morrison's first major comic book project, but lays the framework for his future work in the medium.<sup>1</sup> By the time the prologue for Phase One was published on August 15, 1987 in the 535<sup>th</sup> prog<sup>2</sup> of *2000 AD*, Morrison had already published dozens of stories in a variety of locations. He had been a comic book writer (and occasional artist) for nearly a decade, but much of his work until that point had focused on licensed characters like Zoids,<sup>3</sup> or short pieces published as one or two-page "Future Shocks."<sup>4</sup> With *Zenith*, he created something different. First of all, *Zenith* was a super-hero strip in a magazine which had avoided super-hero strips entirely for 534 issues. Second, it was a series which, because of its ultimate length, would allow him to tell a story of immense scope and grandeur. And third, it was a

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<sup>1</sup> Every *Zenith* installment was drawn by Steve Yeowell, an artist whose appeal lies in his ability to ground extraordinary characters by placing them in a solid context. He tends not to use extreme angles or dynamic perspective to tell the stories, but rather, he uses clean pen lines and solid blacks to give bold form to the proceedings. This is a particularly effective technique when working with Grant Morrison, since Yeowell's artwork adds an understated context for Morrison's outrageous stories.

<sup>2</sup> *2000 AD* issues are called *progs*, short for *programmes*, in keeping with the science fiction nature of the series.

<sup>3</sup> Grant Morrison wrote several back-up stories for the UK comic book entitled *Spider-Man and Zoids*, which featured separate Spider-Man and Zoids tales in each issue. Zoids were robotic creatures created by TOMY, the Japanese toy company.

<sup>4</sup> "Future Shocks," a recurring section of *2000 AD*, were brief science fiction stories with clever twist endings.

chance for Morrison to play the revisionist super-hero game, while, at the same time, expressing his own unique perspective on the nature of fiction and the nature of reality.

The first episode of Phase One doesn't even show the title character, Zenith, at all, which should be a bit of a warning that things may be a little unorthodox in the chapters that follow. Throughout all four Phases, in fact, Zenith is not your typical protagonist. It could be argued that he isn't even the protagonist at all. He's merely the character around whom the story events revolve. As I'll illustrate later, Peter St. John, politician and former '60s radical superhuman, is actually the hero of the story at almost every step of the process. And Zenith himself is a selfish, sarcastic brat who, although likable, never develops or grows in any significant way, even after overcoming impossible challenges and helping to save the universe. One possible criticism of *Zenith*, as a story – a criticism that I wouldn't be willing to make – is that Morrison includes only superficial attempts at characterization (pop culture references, snappy comebacks, etc). This may be true, but to criticize *Zenith* on that ground is to miss the point. *Zenith* is about patterns. *Zenith* is about perspective. *Zenith* is about our paths as we journey through space and time. "There's a pattern here somewhere," says Zenith, "...all we have to do is put the pieces together." *Zenith* is not about reality as we know it – it's a commentary on a larger sense of reality, a commentary on the big, multidimensional picture, a commentary which (luckily for us) has giant robots, super powers, secret agents, evil scientists, and dark gods bent on world domination.

## Phase One

Phase One begins with a flashback to WWII, where we find the British superhuman Maximian<sup>5</sup> fighting his Nazi counterpart, Masterman, in Berlin. Over their heads, an allied plane drops an atomic bomb, destroying them both. We flash forward to the present day, identified as 1987 in a caption. A German woman, Fraulein Hass, stands in front of the preserved body of Masterman and describes her plan to awaken him.

This prologue misdirects the audience in several ways: (1) The tone of

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<sup>5</sup> Maximian, a creation of Morrison's, is an archetypal national hero in the vein of a British Captain America, a super-soldier who wears the flag of his nation on his shirt.

the series is far more ironic than the prologue indicates; (2) Masterman, established here as the antagonist, is revealed later to be a hollow vessel for a much larger evil; (3) The idea of the heroic legacy, and the concept of duty and honor embodied by Maximan's sacrifice in the prologue is antithetical to everything Zenith, as a character, represents. All of which, presumably, is the point. Morrison gives us a conventional super-hero story for all of one episode (if you consider nuking the hero conventional) before subverting our expectations in the very next installment.

The main narrative of Phase One goes something like this: Zenith, the world's only active superhuman, is a bored pop star who finds himself on the front line of a battle against extra-dimensional beings. Ruby Fox, a retired and supposedly depowered superhuman who used to be known as Voltage, is attacked by Masterman (who is merely the host body of an evil god, one of the "many-angled ones" – entities inspired by H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu tales)<sup>6</sup> and then runs to Zenith to warn him about the danger. Zenith is reluctant to get involved until Fox tells him that she'll reveal what really happened to his parents (who died mysteriously when he was a child) if he helps her. The pair tries to enlist politician Peter St. John, formerly the hippy hero known as Mandala, but he coldly rebuffs them. Their last hope is in the form of an overweight drunk of a former hero: Siadwel Rhys, known once-upon-a-time as Red Dragon. After a quick sobering-up and a bit of practice with his newly rediscovered powers, Rhys joins Zenith as they fly back toward London. Fox takes the train, and therefore misses the entire battle. In London, Rhys is quickly disintegrated by Masterman, and just when it looks like Zenith's soul is about to be devoured, St. John shows up to save the day. Zenith destroys the Masterman host body, but the duo is confronted with the multi-dimensional form of Iok Sotot, the eater of souls, who proceeds to devour both Zenith and St. John. Unbeknownst to the reader, St. John had imparted a post-hypnotic suggestion into the mind of Iok Sotot in an earlier episode, and when St. John shouts "Tyger! Tyger!," the many-angled one

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<sup>6</sup> Cthulhu, an otherworldly entity, first appeared in Lovecraft's 1928 short story entitled, "The Call of Cthulhu," published in *Weird Tales* magazine. Lovecraft filled his fiction with alien gods and extra-dimensional beings with multiple eyes and tentacles. His stories, and the expansion of Lovecraft's mythology by writer August Derleth, has inspired a popular role-playing game, the evil forces in the *Hellboy* movie, and a lot of bad teenage writing. *Zenith*, thankfully, rises above its influences.

contorts in an epileptic fit and spews out the two heroes. In the epilogue, during Rhys's funeral, St. John confesses that he played the hero role for the sake of political gain, and soon afterwards Zenith finds that his role as a savior has made him #1 on the singles and album charts.

What Morrison subverts, throughout this narrative, are the conventions of the super-hero melodrama. On the surface, he has the struggle of good (Zenith, St. John, etc.) vs. evil (Nazis and evil beings from another dimension), but Morrison doesn't give us the story that we would normally expect. Zenith is not heroic. He acts purely on self-interest. He only aids Ruby when she promises to provide him with something (information about his parents) in return. And although Ruby fails to deliver on that promise by the end of the story (she goes on holiday instead), Zenith is rewarded for his "heroic" actions by achieving pop stardom. Peter St. John is the actual cause of the victory against the evil force anyway, but he doesn't win through usual super-heroic means. There are a lot of punches and power blasts during the battle scenes, yes, but all of the expended energy doesn't amount to much. The battle is won because of a strategic move made off-panel halfway through the story. This type of anti-climax is typical of Morrison's work, and typical of *Zenith* in particular. Such a structure illustrates that each component of the narrative bears relevance, and while readers have been trained to pay attention to the emphatic points of the story by all of the comic books they've read previously, and while they've been trained to seek satisfaction from an exciting ending in which the hero overcomes the villains through force and ingenuity, Morrison's anti-climax effectively challenges their assumptions about what was and what was not important in the story, priming them for what will come later (most explicitly in Phase Four).

In addition to reconditioning audience expectations, Phase One also lays the groundwork for several themes and motifs which Morrison will explore throughout the entire *Zenith* series (and in future series extending from *Animal Man* to *Doom Patrol* and beyond).

The most dominant theme established in Phase One is the theme of *age*. The conflict between the young and the old, between one generation and the next, is emphasized again and again throughout the text. Zenith, age 19 in 1987, says, "All this '60's stuff... who cares?" – revealing his contempt for the cultural artifacts of the previous generation and setting him up for a conflict between himself and his fellow heroes (both Ruby Fox and Peter St. John were members of Cloud 9 – a 1960s super-hero group which rebelled in

their own way against the generation which preceded them). The generational pattern Morrison establishes here works out to look like this: the 1940s, embodied by Maximan, represent an emphasis on duty and self-sacrifice. The 1960s of Cloud 9 represent rebellion and idealism. The 1980s of *Zenith*, however, represent selfishness and celebrity. Morrison, as a cultural anthropologist of sorts, gives each generation the hero which best embodies its spirit. Contrast this with most comic book heroes, and you'll find that in the 1980s, Marvel and DC were pumping out comic books featuring characters who lifelessly embodied the spirit of a bygone age.<sup>7</sup> For Morrison, the ethics of the '40s and the '60s no longer represented the world, while *Zenith* himself garishly represents his time and its focus on celebrity, superficiality, and the self.

A strong *mind / body* theme also runs throughout Phase One. Morrison himself has acknowledged that he was "straightedge" (no smoking, no drugs, no alcohol) at the time he was writing the first part of *Zenith*, and it shows. The major component of the straightedge philosophy is that drugs have a negative impact on both the mind and the body, and throughout Phase One, characters who use drugs or alcohol are adversely affected. When we first meet *Zenith*, for example, he is drunkenly flying through the skylight of his apartment. Because of his impairment, he crashes into the sofa. The major example, however, comes in the form of ex-super-hero Siadwel Rhys. He's an overweight alcoholic when he's introduced, and the implication is that the alcohol has dampened his superhuman powers. As he sobers up and ultimately renounces alcohol before the final battle, his powers grow stronger. Morrison doesn't preach to the reader, but there is an overt connection between clarity of mind and effectiveness of body throughout the series. *Zenith*'s powers actually fluctuate with his monthly biorhythms. This fact, established when he initially appears, plays a role in a later storyline, but it also shows Morrison's interest in the cyclical nature of life, and the way patterns can both reveal and predict. *Zenith*, for example, can project which days of the month will be his strongest and which days will leave him totally powerless. The two other primary appearances of the *mind / body*

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<sup>7</sup> The trend of recycling characters from an earlier age is arguably even worse today than it was twenty years ago. While both Marvel and DC try to update their heroes for each new generation, their attempts at what they call "Ultimate" or "Year One" stories sometimes result in nothing more than re-telling the same old stories at a much slower pace.

theme are found in the use of Masterman as host for the Iok Sotot entity and Peter St. John's ultimate method of victory over him. In the first case, the mind of Iok Sotot lacks a corporeal body and exists as pure thought until it is contained by Masterman's superhuman husk. In the second case, St. John uses his own mind as a weapon against Iok Sotot, causing the being to convulse into a type of epileptic fit, which allows St. John (and Zenith) to escape from the "belly of the beast" (they had been devoured by the disembodied being).<sup>8</sup> Mind trumps body in the climactic scenes of Phase One.

A *metaphysical* theme appears prominently in Phase One as well. In the prologue, Masterman (with his actual mind intact) points to the heavens and tells Maximian, "There's no-one up there," while Zenith's pop single is identified as "Heaven Can't Wait." The true hero of the story, Peter St. John, is named after two apostles of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and he says this about his powers: "I can control your perception... I can make you see anything... Anything at all." If our concept of reality is based on our perception of it, St. John can alter reality as we know it. The other religious / metaphysical references I've mentioned don't provide answers to any questions (Masterman tries to, but he's wrong – there is someone up there, and he's dropping an atomic bomb on Masterman's head), but they identify issues that Morrison explores over the span of the four Phases. The nature of God is something that Morrison deals with many, many times, and in the case of Phase One, the only gods we see are the many-angled ones, who are clearly evil. Morrison does give us a reference to something called the Omnihedron, but its ominous potency is not revealed until a later Phase.

Morrison also explores the nature of *power* in Phase One. Three characters seek power in the story, and each searches for it in a different way. Zenith seeks celebrity and popularity, which he equates with power. He has no interest in physical might. When Ruby Fox tries to engage him to fight against the threat of Masterman, Zenith scoffs and says he's "not a boxer." Zenith, who has an agent named Eddie (who acts as a revisionist version of

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<sup>8</sup> How might a disembodied being devour someone? Iok Sotot lacks a corporeal form, but he does exist as a kind of indescribable energy, and within the story, he takes the shape of a giant mouth for just long enough to swallow the heroes. By the rules of comic book logic, it all makes sense.

<sup>9</sup> St. Peter and John the Revelator, respectively.

Bruce Wayne's butler, Alfred),<sup>10</sup> wants to make music videos and reach #1 on the charts. Peter St. John wants political power, and he appears willing to achieve it by any means necessary. He says, after the battle: "I didn't fight Masterman for you [Ruby]... I did it to pick up votes in the election." Heroism is a means to an end, just as it is for Zenith. The final approach to power is exemplified by Masterman / Iok Sotot. This creature kills anyone who opposes it (except St. John and Zenith, both of whom are allowed to live because the creature wants to use them to its advantage later – a choice which, not surprisingly, results in its own defeat), and what it wants is total domination. In essence, Zenith wants to sell records, St. John wants to govern, and Iok Sotot wants to destroy. The power they crave is essential only in so far as it helps them achieve those specific goals. Unlike traditional super-hero / super-villain scenarios, Morrison's *Zenith* doesn't show us characters interested in altruism, justice, or pulling a bank heist. Zenith, St. John, and Iok Sotot use their power for more globally selfish motives.

Besides exploring the themes above, Morrison also includes several motifs which provide a pattern throughout the narrative. The three major motifs include *fashion*, *flying*, and *doubling*. Fashion comes to the foreground in the character of Zenith, whose super-hero outfit is a fashion choice, not a crime-fighting costume. He also accessorizes his outfit with a jacket, providing a stylistic twist on the traditional uniform. Adding a jacket<sup>11</sup> to "update" a character is a particularly common motif throughout Morrison's work from *Zenith* onward. To emphasize the costume-as-fashion-choice idea, one of the characters refers to "Jean-Paul Gaultier's 'Superhuman Collection.'" Another example of the fashion motif occurs the moment Siadwel Rhys says, "I'm ready now." He doesn't say those words until he has the old costume back on. And to offer a counterpoint to that, Peter St. John never dons his old costume at any point in the story (or in any following story). His "costume" is a business suit throughout this Phase,

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<sup>10</sup> If the support for a young, male hero from the 1940s like Batman was a butler, then what could be more appropriate for a young, male hero from the 1980s like Zenith than an agent? Morrison is always commenting upon these cultural shifts by playing with archetypes like this.

<sup>11</sup> 2000 AD artist Brendan McCarthy designed the characters for the *Zenith* strip, even though Steve Yeowell drew every installment. McCarthy basically invented the contemporary tradition of super-hero-costume-under-a-cool-jacket in 1983 with the creation of the Paradax strip for Eclipse Comics' *Strange Days*, in collaboration with writer Peter Milligan.

even when he's using his powers.

The flying motif is linked to many of the themes in the story. In *Zenith*, power is linked with flight. For example, Zenith triggers Siadwel Rhys's powers by flying him into the air and dropping him. Before Rhys hits the ground, his powers kick in, allowing him to fly to safety. Ruby, earlier in the story, flies out of her window to escape Masterman, and then, later in the story, she is too drained to fly, so she takes the train (thereby sparing her life – she certainly would have died, just as Siadwel did). The most interesting use of the flying motif is a panel transition in Chapter 10 when St. John says, "There's not much we can do, except pray. And hope someone up there likes us." The very next panel shows the apparent saviors, Zenith and Rhys, flying overhead. The flying motif links most of the themes together and reinforces the concept of the superhuman as a god, a concept Morrison explores more deeply in later Phases.

The final and most obvious motif is that of doubling. Right away we have the mirror images of Maximan and Masterman. We later find out that the Masterman of 1987 is the twin of the one killed in Berlin. Heroes are constantly shown in pairs. First, it's Ruby Fox and Zenith trying to enlist help. Then, Zenith is paired with Siadwel Rhys as they train with their powers together. Then, in the final battle, Zenith and Peter St. John are paired against Iok Sotot. At no point in the story are all of the heroes fighting together as a big group. Morrison always uses pairs. The idea of doubling doesn't stop there. Spook, a member of '60s super-hero group Cloud 9, disappeared through a mirror, a symbol of the doubling effect. And Iok Sotot itself comes from a parallel dimension. Morrison expands upon all of these ideas in future Phases, but he lays the foundation here.

By the time Phase One comes to a close, the world has been saved, and the extra-dimensional threat of the many-angled ones has been halted, if not totally eradicated. Zenith, a self-centered character from the beginning, whines throughout the story and even cries to his agent, Eddie, for help when he's in the bowels of Iok Sotot. If he learns a lesson from his experiences, it's that he can profit from looking like a hero. St. John, meanwhile, gains immeasurable political clout from his actions, and Ruby Fox gets a vacation. Ultimately, though, all of these things are just patterns in spacetime, but they aren't (contrary to what Iok Sotot says) mindless patterns. They are patterns defined by Grant Morrison. He continues to weave these patterns, these

themes, these motifs, and expand upon all of them, throughout the next three Phases.

## Interlude

Two months after Phase One of *Zenith* ended, and several months before Phase Two launched in August of 1988, Grant Morrison provided a two-part interlude in *2000 AD*, progs 558-559. The interlude allowed Morrison to reveal some backstory without the exposition getting in the way of the upcoming storyline, and it also established the dominant theme of the second Phase: *hubris*.

As I mentioned in my analysis of Phase One, Peter St. John defeated dark god Iok Sotot with a post-hypnotic suggestion. The trigger he used was “Tyger! Tyger!” – a reference to the famous poem by William Blake:

“The Tyger”  
by William Blake (1757-1827)

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,