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Heed the Coyote Gospel: Understanding Cruelty Through Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*

Prior to Grant Morrison's *Animal Man*, the character of Buddy Baker or Animal Man was little more than a forgotten golden age superhero with the power to mimic the ability of animals in his surroundings. In their 1988-1990 run, though, Morrison writes a story that effortlessly intertwines grounded messages about animal rights with a thought-provoking metalepsis narrative that raises questions about higher power, revamping Animal Man for a modern audience. As a superhero with animal-based powers, Buddy Baker is naturally written into adventures where he must fight for the rights of animals. At the start of the story, Buddy initially exits his retirement as a superhero for the sake of working, but encounters with animal cruelty lead to him getting progressively more passionate about animal rights activism. Simultaneously, several strange occurrences underlying his adventures suddenly has Buddy faced with the revelation that he is a comic book character, culminating in a confrontation with the comic's author, Grant Morrison.

When it comes to the scholarly conversation surrounding Grant Morrison's run of *Animal Man*, there are two main themes that dominate the discussion: animal rights and metalepsis. While scholars are concerned with both themes in general, the individual secondary sources tend to draw their attention towards only one theme or the other. Some of the scholarly sources direct their focus solely to what *Animal Man* has to say about animal rights. They may discuss how the comic places an emphasis on animals in order to give them a voice, how it forms connections

between animals and humans, or what aspects of the real-life animal rights argument are directly represented in the comic. On the other hand, there are scholarly sources that direct their attention towards the metalepsis narrative presented in *Animal Man*. For these scholars, the core focus is placed on how Morrison plays with and blurs the boundaries between the fictional world and comic world, as well as how these metalepsis interactions present the experience of existing under a higher power. Overall, the scholarly conversation does an excellent job at exploring these fascinating themes of *Animal Man* in isolation. Where it falls short, though, is in analyzing how Morrison is able to take advantage of metalepsis to further the animal rights argument presented in *Animal Man No. 5*, “The Coyote Gospel.”

At the dawn of the modern comic age, Grant Morrison transforms a simple golden age superhero into a story with deeply complex themes surrounding the rights of animals as well as the nature of existence for a fictional character. While scholars are able to analyze the presence of these topics in *Animal Man* on their own accord, it is apparent from issue no. 5 of the comic that Morrison means for the two to be contemplated in tandem with one another as the audience reads through the story. In *Animal Man No. 5*, “The Coyote Gospel,” Morrison uses an anthropomorphized cartoon coyote named Crafty to initially introduce criticism on animal cruelty. As the *Animal Man* story further unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that Buddy Baker’s metalepsis narrative mirrors the journey of Crafty, situating both characters as lesser beings that are controlled by a higher power. Thus, Morrison uses metalepsis as a tool for making their argument against animal cruelty more relatable to human audiences, by placing Buddy the human in the same position of power as Crafty the animal.

The presence of animal rights activism in *Animal Man* is a direct result of Morrison’s own passion for animal rights. During a dialogue between Buddy Baker and Morrison that takes

place during *Animal Man No. 26*, which is Morrison's final issue of *Animal Man*, Morrison explicitly mentions their vegetarianism, animal rights activism, and motivations in writing *Animal Man* (Morrison No. 26 12-13). Scholars Márcio dos Santos Rodrigues and Matheus da Cruz e Zica note that Morrison did indeed join the Animal Liberation Front Supporters Group shortly after publication of *Animal Man* began (dos Santos Rodrigues 72). An important concept for how Morrison presents animal rights is what scholar Martin de la Iglesia describes as animal focalization, a narrative device where the animal perspective is represented and is evidently different from a human's perspective (de la Iglesia 91), which is showcased throughout the comic such as in the form of a dolphin's text bubbles in *Animal Man No. 15* (Morrison No. 15 1).

As defined by Jeff Thoss, metalepsis is a sort of encounter or clashing between the diegetic world of the story and the extra-diegetic world of the readers (Thoss 189). To a mainstream audience, the idea of metalepsis and characters "breaking the fourth-wall" most likely brings to mind comedy, such as with Marvel's famous Deadpool character. However, Morrison does not use metalepsis with the intent of comedy in *Animal Man*; rather, Buddy's revelation that he is a work of fiction and the implications of such a revelation is written with a very serious tone that evokes feelings of horror and existentialism. One such instance of this is in Figure 1 from *Animal Man No. 19*, where Buddy witnesses the golden age version of himself disappear from existence; as Buddy attempts to get a grasp of his situation, he turns around to face the reader, proclaiming that he can see them with a shocked expression on his face (Morrison No. 19 9-11). Afterwards, Buddy has a somber talk with another character about what it might mean to be characters in a story that are created for the entertainment of an audience (Morrison No. 19 13). Clearly, Morrison seeks to use the fourth-wall break as a tool for driving the narrative towards a discussion about existence under a higher power.



Fig. 1. Animal Man exclaims “I can see you!” from the shock of seeing the readers, *Animal Man* No. 19, Grant Morrison, 1990.

In issue no. 5 of Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* titled "The Coyote Gospel," readers are introduced to the character Crafty Coyote, a cartoon coyote that has suddenly appeared in the "real" world of the comic. Seemingly a parody of Wile E. Coyote from the *Looney Tunes* franchise, Crafty acts in a part as a representation of animal violence. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, the first pages of "The Coyote Gospel" depict a trucker driving a hitchhiker across Death Valley, California, at which point the pair over a shadowy figure shown to be Crafty Coyote. The following page portrays Crafty as his body gradually recovers from being run over. The first word provided in narration during this regenerative process is "Pain," which makes it apparent that Morrison wants the reader to focus on what Crafty feels as he recovers from his gruesome injury (Morrison No. 5 2-3). Indeed, not only are the audience shown graphic illustrations of organs spilling out of Crafty's divided body, but they are given in-depth narration describing the numerous internal injuries Crafty has suffered (Morrison No. 5 4). It would seem that Morrison does not wish to shy away from this visceral depiction of injury. Additionally, the narration notes that Crafty himself shudders during the experience and weeps; while he may have the ability to heal from such severe injuries, Crafty still undergoes a great amount of suffering. The abundance of narration detailing the feelings of Crafty relate back to the previously mentioned term of animal focalization; this is especially important as this animal focalization can only be experienced by the audience, as Crafty is mute, so it is clear that the audience is meant to understand Crafty's pain from his perspective. Morrison takes advantage of Crafty's regenerative abilities to depict disturbing scenes of animal violence as well as an animal's reaction to said violence.

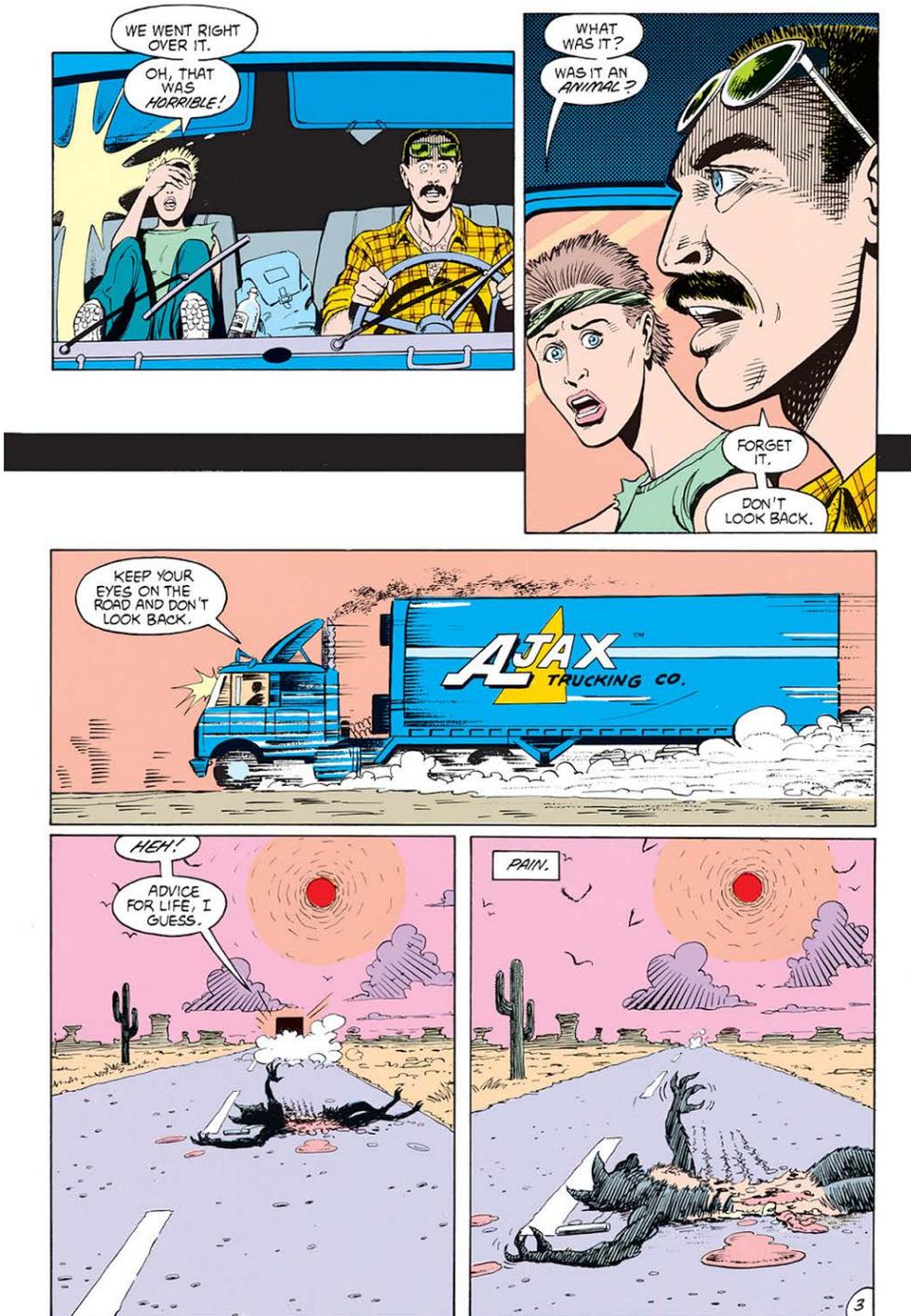


Fig. 2. Crafty Coyote is run over by a trucker with a hitchhiker, and he subsequently regenerates from his injuries, *Animal Man No. 5*, Grant Morrison, 1988.

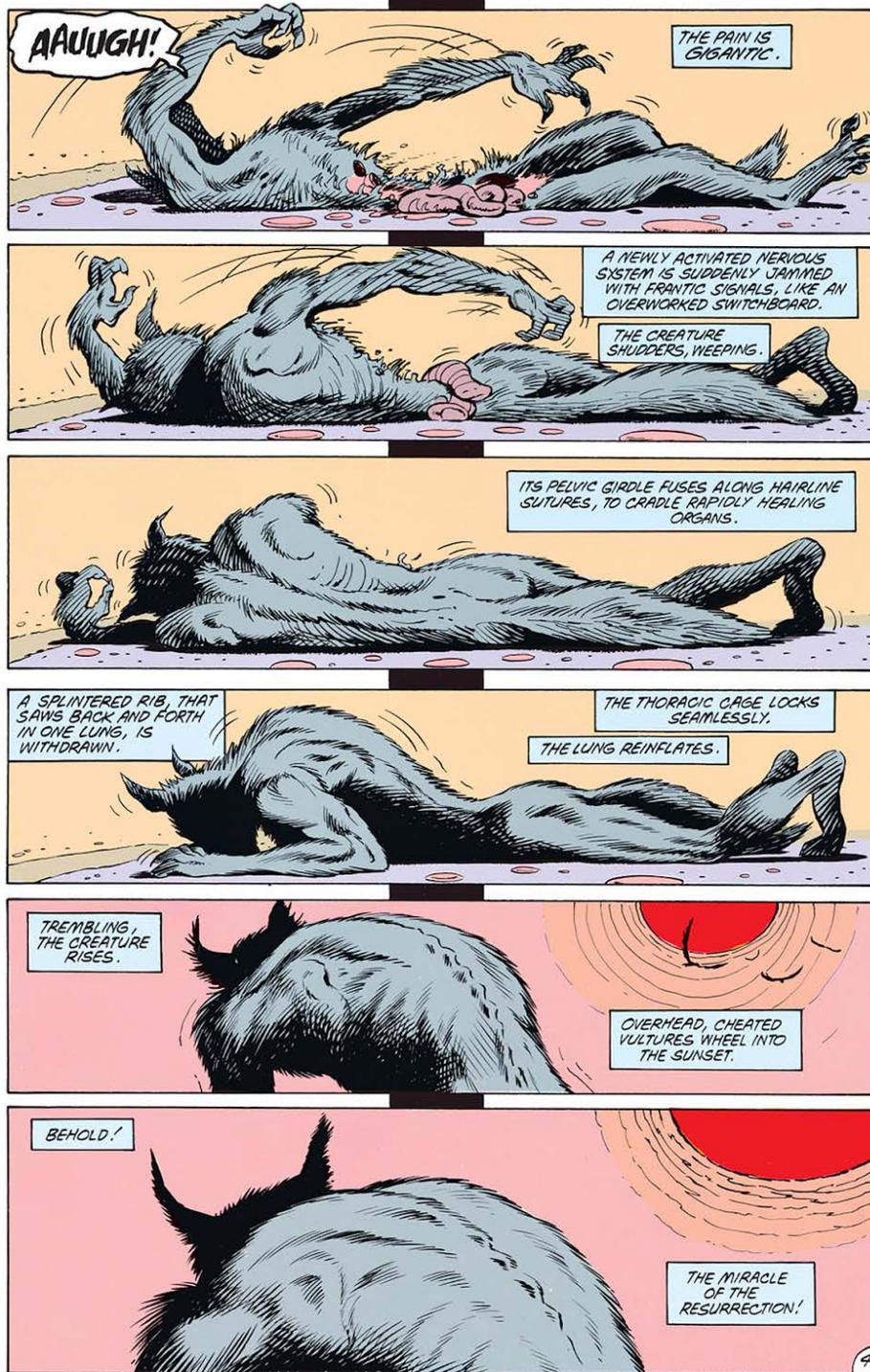


Fig. 3. Crafty subsequently regenerates from his injuries, *Animal Man No. 5*, Grant Morrison, 1988.

What's more, "The Coyote Gospel" not only seeks to demonstrate the experience of animal violence but its repetitive nature. It is revealed that this introduction was a flashback to a year prior to the present and Crafty has been hunted for the past year by the same trucker that ran him over, who believes Crafty to be the Devil after undergoing numerous tragedies following their encounter. Alongside a variety of traps, the trucker assails Crafty using a rifle, hunting Crafty over and over each time he regenerates (Morrison No. 5 10-12). Morrison could have easily written the events of the introduction to have taken place in the present, but they purposefully want Crafty to have been hunted for an extended period of time. These direct comparisons with real-life acts of hunting again demonstrate Morrison's genuine interest in animal rights activism as mentioned by dos Santos Rodrigues and da Cruz e Zica. In the brief moment before the audience sees Crafty attacked, he appears almost contemplative, staring solemnly over the edge of a canyon. Despite Crafty's cartoon coyote face, he clearly displays a feeling of anguish as he is shot and hunted by the trucker, illustrated in Figure 4 (Morrison No. 11-12). In further discussing how Crafty is affected by these acts of animal violence, Morrison is also displaying the cyclical nature of hunting, where animals are shot again and again over time. They showcase how this hunting disturbs the peace and tranquility of nature in the form of Crafty's expressions. Morrison dives deeper into this cycle of violence with the circumstances surrounding Crafty's appearance. It is revealed to the readers, and solely to the readers, that Crafty had grown tired of the constant violence cartoon animals committed against one another. Crafty decides to confront the God of his reality, who is depicted as a human cartoonist, who proclaims that Crafty must endure the pain of "the second reality" in exchange for peace in the cartoon world. In the case of the cartoon, the animal violence is being carried out by the animals themselves, but the animals only partake in this violence as it is the reality their human creator

dictates for them. Thus, the origin of Crafty still represents a cycle of violence being carried out on animals by a human perpetrator. Returning to the notion that Crafty's thoughts may represent how animals feel about said violence, it is of note that the narration describes Crafty as having wept before finally deciding to confront his creator. It is here that Morrison is presenting the notion that animals could feel deep sadness about the animal violence being done against them by people, yet they remain powerless in stopping these acts.

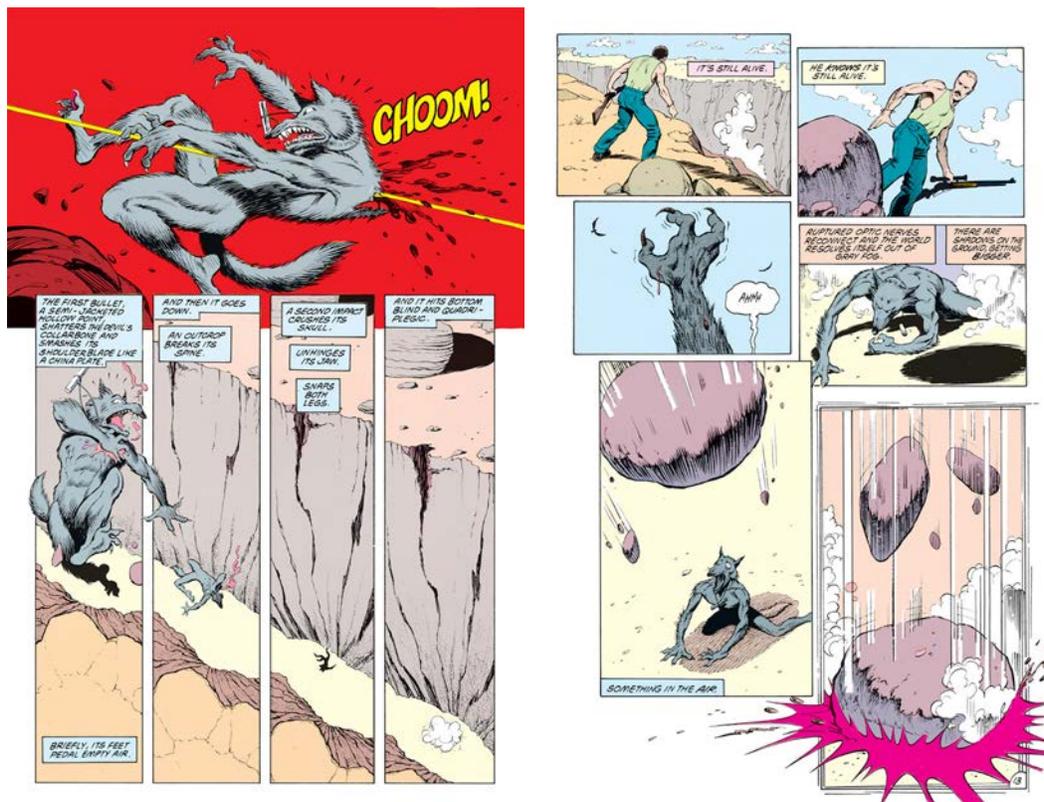


Fig. 4. Crafty displays expressions of pain and anguish as he is shot and hunted by the trucker, *Animal Man No. 5*, Grant Morrison, 1988.

Crafty Coyote does not necessarily represent only animal violence, however, as his character introduces beliefs about higher power in the form of religious symbolism. God states that Crafty's confrontation is a "rebellion" against him (Morrison No. 5 19), which may indicate to readers how Crafty could be mirroring the angel Lucifer's rebellion against the Abrahamic

God. Certainly, just as Lucifer was cast down out of heaven for his rebellion, Crafty is sent up out of his cartoon reality into “the hell above” (Morrison No. 5 20). Both Crafty and Lucifer are punished by their God for their actions against him. In a sense, this mirroring with Lucifer means Crafty actually is a Devil-like figure as the trucker had believed. The narration even goes so far as to explain that Crafty still holds onto the hope that he will eventually be able to overthrow his God, further cementing the Devil comparison (Morrison No. 5 21). In the eyes of some readers, this comparison may justify some of the actions taken against Crafty as a form of retribution for rebelling against a higher power. However, Crafty represents a holy figure just as much as he does a Devil-like figure. After all, it is explained in the narration that Crafty’s punishment of being sent to the “real” world would redeem the cartoon world and bring about peace (Morrison No. 5 20). Crafty suffers in this reality, dying over and over, in order to atone for the sins of his fellow cartoon animals; as such, Crafty becomes a Jesus-like figure. The comparison is only made more visually apparent as he is shot and killed permanently with a silver bullet during the final pages of the comic issue. The wounded Crafty slowly bleeds out and dies on the road with his arms outstretched from his body in a crucifix position, and the panels slowly pan out to reveal the roads are in the shape of a cross. God’s hand appears from off-panel to color in Crafty’s blood with red ink, which can be seen in Figure 5 (Morrison No. 5 22-24). Where the Devil comparison promotes justification of what Craft goes through, the Jesus comparisons almost evokes a sense of pity for Crafty. Through this dual representation in reference to his rebellion against the human cartoonist, Crafty exemplifies how the way humans characterize an animal is fluid and ever changing. In the end, from his introduction into his death, the audience witnesses how Crafty is forced to undergo significant suffering due to the control of some higher power.



Fig. 5. Crafty bleeds out in a crucifix position at a crossroads with his blood getting colored in, *Animal Man No. 5*, Grant Morrison, 1988.

Going beyond “The Coyote Gospel” to later parts of the *Animal Man* run, the concept of a higher power remains an important topic as the metalepsis narrative progresses and Buddy Baker gradually reaches the revelation that he exists as a comic book character. Much like how the story of Crafty was at the whims of some higher power, there are references to a higher power controlling Buddy’s life throughout the run. This is most realized in *Animal Man No. 26*, the final issue of Grant Morrison’s run, where Buddy meets Morrison face-to-face. Figure 6 illustrates how Morrison tells Buddy plainly that they are the higher power that controls Buddy’s life, even classifying themselves as the villain from Buddy’s perspective (Morrison No. 26 2). Despite existing as the higher power in this situation, Morrison is making it clear that they do not look favorably upon that position of power, fully aware that it is an antagonistic force in Buddy’s life. Morrison continues being very straightforward when speaking to Buddy, explaining how people in the real, extra-diegetic world will gladly subject fictional characters like Buddy to pain and suffering for the sake of their own entertainment (Morrison No. 26 19). The blunt word choice Morrison gives to their proxy within the story during this conversation with Buddy is not meant to indicate that Morrison agrees with this mindset behind how creators approach fiction; rather, the bluntness represents how distant or apathetic this mindset in a higher power can be, with Morrison applying this bluntness to themselves as they are, in-fact, the higher power within the context of *Animal Man*. Interestingly, it is pointed out by scholars Adnan Mahmutovic, David Coughlan, and Stephen Blake that nearly all of the villains that Buddy faces throughout *Animal Man* are human individuals that subject animals to abuse or suffering, seemingly without any empathy at all for those animals (Mahmutovic). While Morrison is not necessarily meddling with an animal in this case, they are indeed a human figure who writes the trials and tribulations of Buddy Baker, a superhero with animal-based powers; as such, Morrison appears to be comparing

their role as the author to the villainous animal abusers they depicted in the story. In that regard, Morrison begins subtly forming connections between the metanarrative built around Buddy to the animal rights argument presented through Crafty, as they liken the relationship between the extra-diegetic real world and diegetic fictional world to the relationship between humans and animals in terms of a hierarchy of power.

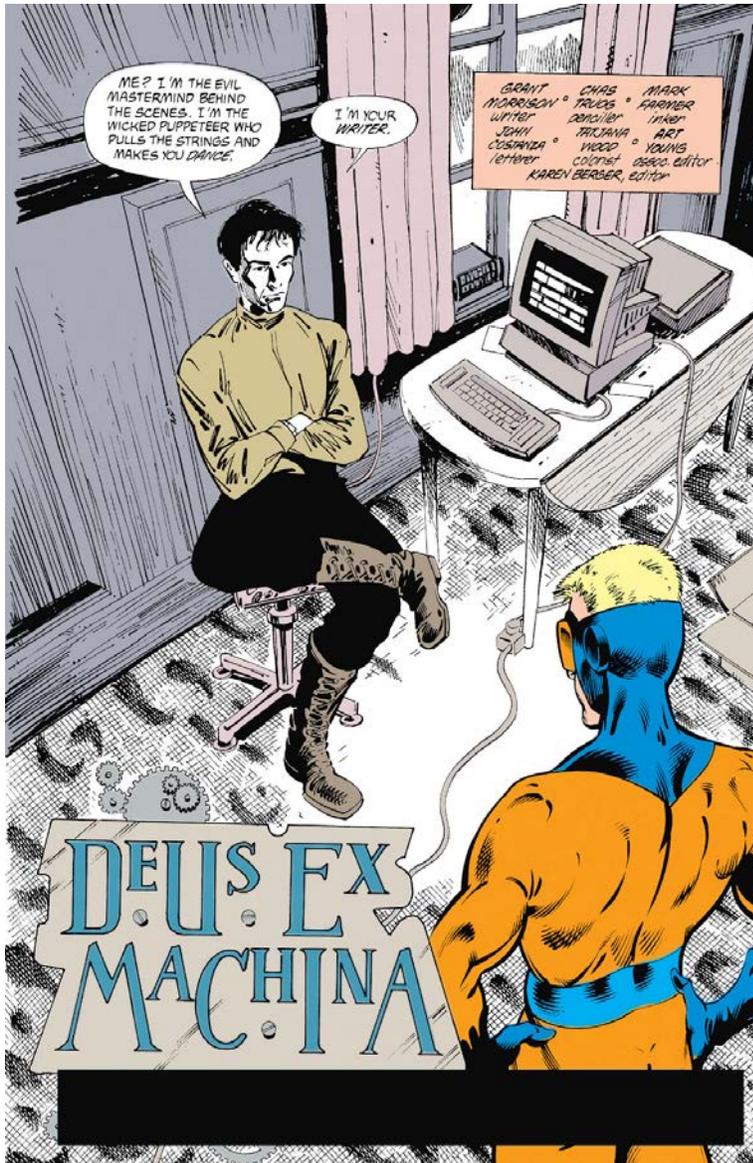


Fig. 6. Morrison reveals himself as Buddy Baker's writer, *Animal Man No. 26*, Grant Morrison, 1990.

On its own, the commentary that Morrison presents in the metanarrative about the relationship between a creator and their fiction may have only a vague connection to their animal rights argument, but this connection is greatly reinforced by the parallels that exist between Buddy Baker and Crafty Coyote. The most obvious similarity between Buddy and Crafty is the fact that both characters are fictional beings that have a metalepsis encounter with an extra-diegetic creator or world. As previously mentioned, Crafty's journey begins with him confronting the God of his reality, the cartoonist who created the cartoon world Crafty originates from (Morrison No. 5 19). This is mirrored by Buddy's own journey in the run, which concludes with him confronting Grant Morrison, the writer for the *Animal Man* run (Morrison No. 26 2). In a way, the metalepsis aspects of Crafty's story almost act as foreshadowing for the overall metalepsis narrative of *Animal Man* and Buddy Baker. Curiously, both creators of higher power are depicted as humans; of course, Grant Morrison is a real human being, but even Crafty's cartoonist God is a human in spite of the fact that every other cartoon being is an animal. Additionally, Buddy and Crafty have shared motivations as revealed during their confrontations, with Crafty wanting to get rid of the senseless violence the cartoon animals are subjected to (Morrison No. 5 19) and Buddy hoping to have his recently murdered family resurrected (Morrison No. 26 13-14). In each case, the being of lesser power makes a plea with the higher power governing their reality to put an end to the cruelty they are subjected to, and said plea is at least initially rejected by the higher power both times. Furthermore, Crafty's metalepsis encounter involves him being forced out of the bounds of his diegetic cartoon reality into the world of DC Comics and *Animal Man*, which is extra-diegetic relative to him (Morrison No. 5 20). While it is not necessarily possible for Buddy to truly reach the real world that the audience and Morrison exist in, he does escape his comic book reality insofar as he ends up in a sort of

extra-diegetic limbo that exists outside the world of *Animal Man* (Morrison No. 25 5-6) or literally enters the empty space bordering comic panels (Morrison No. 19 17). This mirrored transcendence past the bounds of a diegetic reality are even emphasized in the visual medium in Figure 7; Crafty is accompanied by red ink blots as he is being sent out of his cartoon reality (Morrison No. 5 20) and similar red ink blots are seen alongside Buddy as he is sent to the empty space outside the comic panels (Morrison No. 19 8). There is clearly an emphasis on these extra-diegetic realities of higher power existing beyond and above the diegetic Crafty and Buddy. What's more is that Morrison originally uses Crafty's existence under a higher power as part of an animal rights argument; as such, Morrison paralleling the metalepsis of Crafty and Buddy essentially has Buddy playing the same role of Crafty in the animal rights argument, assuming the lesser position of power of an animal under the higher power of a human creator. In fact, this parallel Morrison has formed is actually an example of zoomorphic projection, a term employed by scholar David Herman to refer to a human being blended with the non-human through a defamiliarization of man (Herman 171, 174). It is also important to specify that Herman views zoomorphic projection as distinct from dehumanization; where dehumanization involves a human figure undergoing a "loss or degradation" to be viewed as nonhuman, zoomorphic projection revolves around projecting nonhuman characteristics onto a human. In the case of *Animal Man*, the nonhuman characteristic projected onto Buddy is his existence as a diegetic, fictional character subject to some higher power, a trait that he shares with Crafty Coyote.

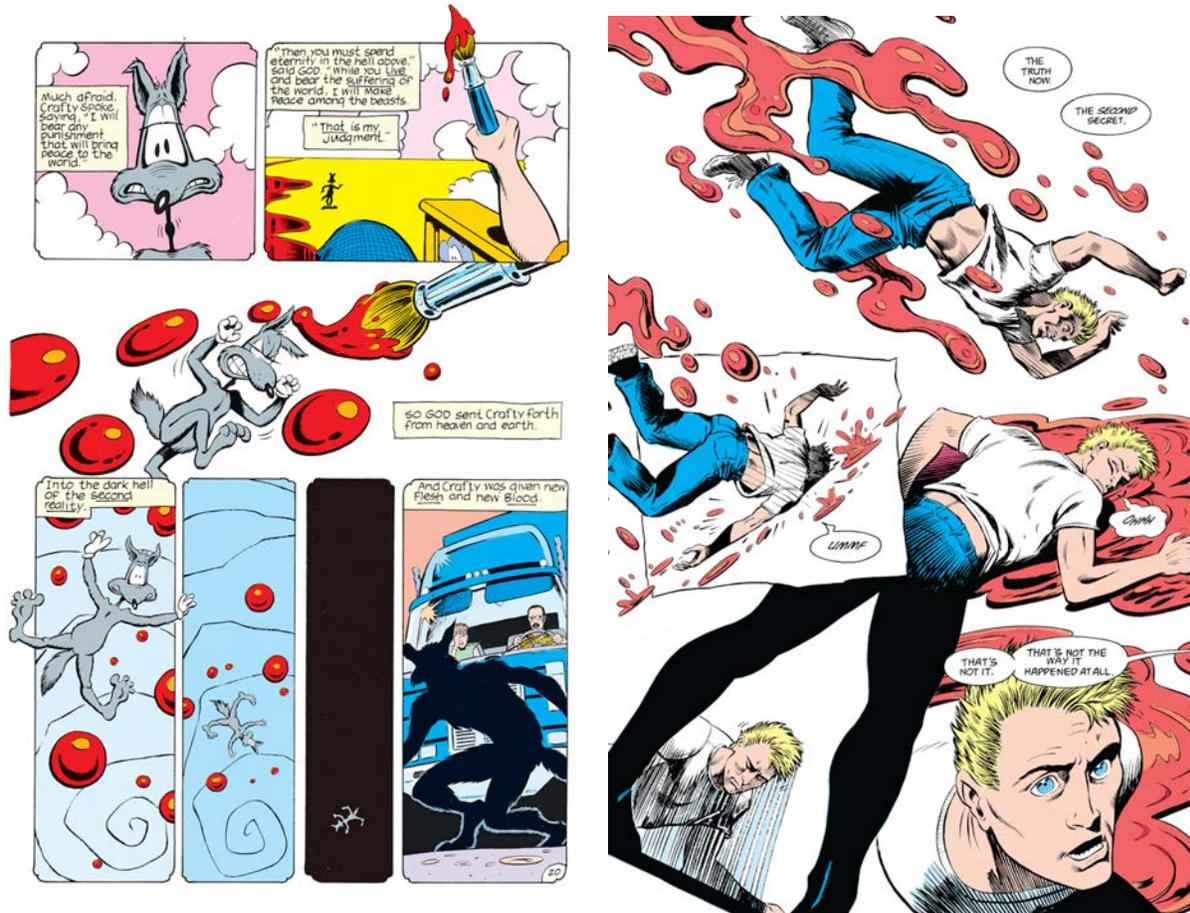


Fig. 7. Crafty and Buddy exiting their diegetic realities, *Animal Man No. 5* and *Animal Man No. 19*, Grant Morrison, 1988 and 1990.

In a rhetorical sense, Morrison seems to parallel the journeys of Buddy and Crafty and retell the same animal rights argument with Buddy in the place of Crafty in order to make said argument more relatable to the audience. From a character design standpoint, Buddy himself is fairly human despite his animal-based superpowers. He bears no actual animal characteristics on his own body, even when using his powers (Morrison No. 13), and his costume is not animal-themed either. In fact, Buddy dons a regular jean jacket over his costume as he views the idea of a skin-tight outfit embarrassing, as shown in Figure 8 (Morrison No. 19). Visually, Buddy can be seen as a completely normal human being. He even understands how the

appearance of a standard superhero costume can be a bit ridiculous, much like the average person would. Even the prominence of Buddy's family and his dedication to his family makes him more relatable to the audience as a person and not just a character; indeed, Buddy actually having a full nuclear family with a wife and two kids is an aspect of his character that Morrison newly created, as revealed when the golden age version of Buddy stated he only possessed a wife (Morrison No. 19 9). Despite Morrison employing zoomorphic projection on Buddy, it is apparent that Morrison put forth great effort to characterize Buddy as someone the average reader would be able to relate to on a personal level. Morrison's methods can be better understood through the context of scholar Jeanne C. Ewert's analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Ewert remarks upon how Spiegelman's metaphor of Jewish people as anthropomorphized mice was employed subtly for the sole purpose of establishing relations between different groups, with the mice behaving as regular humans otherwise. Since the metaphor is more subtle, the reader can more easily identify with the characters (Ewert 95, 97). While Morrison is able to present an animal rights argument with just Crafty Coyote in *Animal Man No. 5*, Crafty's appearance as an anthropomorphized cartoon coyote would inevitably alienate readers, preventing them from fully understanding the cruelty an animal faces under a higher power. By mirroring Crafty and Buddy, however, Morrison is able to shift the animal rights argument onto Buddy, having a human assume the position of an animal in a hierarchy of diegetic power. Morrison then curates Buddy's character to be as relatable as possible for a superpowered human, allowing readers to better comprehend Morrison's animal rights argument from the perspective of Buddy and the cruelty he faces.

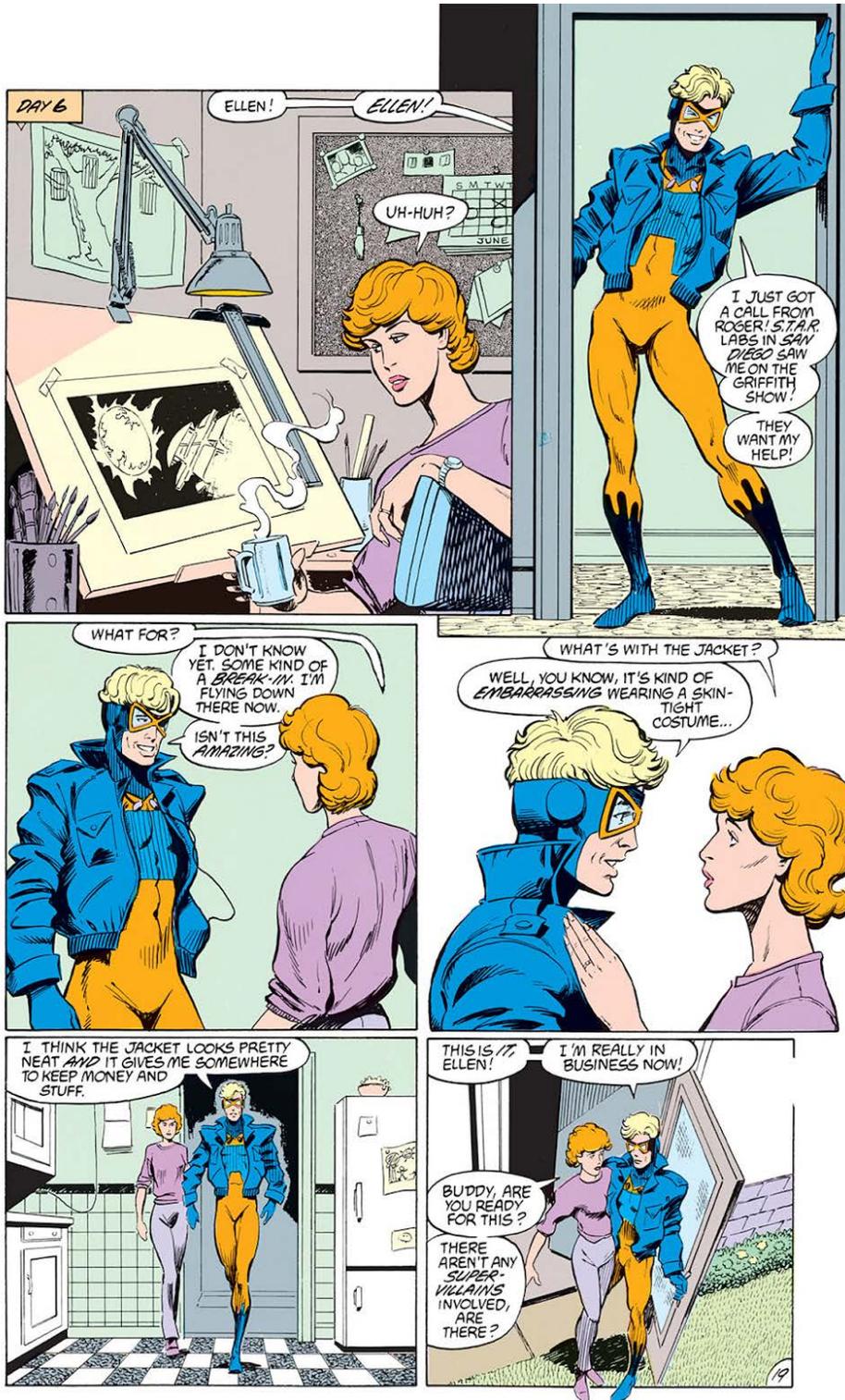


Fig. 8. Buddy dons a jean jacket on top of his Animal Man costume, *Animal Man No. 1*, Grant Morrison, 1988.

All in all, Grant Morrison uses their 1988-1990 run on *Animal Man* to initially present an animal rights argument through the character of Crafty Coyote, only to use a mirrored metalepsis narrative to present the same argument through Buddy Baker as to have audiences resonate more with the argument. What's so interesting about Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* is the "when" and "how" of what it accomplishes in presenting this argument that uses animal rights and metalepsis in tandem with one another. *Animal Man No. 1* was published in 1988, which means that Morrison's run begins a mere three years after the start of what is referred to as the Modern Age of Comic Books in 1985. Two notable comics that are paired with the hailing of the Modern Age are Alan Moore's 1986-1987 comic *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's 1986 comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. Like Grant Morrison with *Animal Man*, both authors incorporated their own messages, arguments, and criticisms regarding the world into their comics. Where these comics differ largely from *Animal Man*, though, is in presentation; *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* both depict a bleak, gritty world of superheroes for the sake of telling a more mature story as was common with the rise of the Modern Age. *Animal Man* tells a mature story as well, yet it does not disregard the origin and nature of its comic book medium in order to do so. In spite of the narrative having a fairly dark themes about animal cruelty, death, and existentialism, the world of *Animal Man* remains fantastical. Morrison does not simply embrace the nature of comics to tell their story, they utilize the very concept of comics being fictional as a tool for relaying a grounded message about animal rights. In doing so, Morrison is able to truly embody the effectiveness of comic books as an art form and medium that can connect with mature audiences.

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