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## TWO TALES OF ONE CITY: NEO-VICTORIAN LONDON IN ALAN MOORE'S *FROM HELL* AND PETER ACKROYD'S *DAN LENO AND THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM*

### Summary

The article presents an analysis of two neo-Victorian Londons: that of Peter Ackroyd in the novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and that of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell in the graphic novel *From Hell*. Particular attention has been given to the representation of the city in terms of the most characteristic elements of London and its mode of portrayal in each work. The article also presents how the British capital is personified or at least treated as a driving force behind human actions, as well as the subjectification of the city and its functioning as a text. Finally, the article focuses on the superposition of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, i.e. the times of action and writing of both works, and how relevant these texts are at the present time.

**Key words:** London, Alan Moore, Edie Campbell, Peter Ackroyd, neo-Victorian literature, graphic novels.

### Introduction

'I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow. / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe,' wrote William Blake in *London* (Blake 1866, p. 65). Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell in *From Hell* (1989-1996) and Peter Ackroyd in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) portray late Victorian London in a similar spirit. Both narratives are built around series of murders committed among the urban poor. In both texts London is not only the background, but also the subject of analysis as 'a brooding presence behind, or perhaps even within, the murders themselves' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 38).

Both novels touch upon the effects of rapid urbanization on human relations in the city. London, over 80 years after the publication of *Howards End*, is once again presented as an element of 'this nomadic civilisation which is altering human nature so profoundly, and throws upon personal relations a stress greater than they have ever borne before' (Forster, p. 261). Moore's and Ackroyd's works build upon the characteristic of the city-dweller accurately described by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*: 'the fact that he belongs to many social groups – work, worship, home, leisure – but no single person knows him in all his roles, and nor does he know anyone else in all theirs' (Watt 1957, p. 185). Hence, a multifaceted city is presented, inhabited by many-faced personae.

Both texts openly invoke modern times, provoking questions on the changes which have taken place during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to what extent progress has been made.

## London A-Z

The city is represented in different modes in the text of Peter Ackroyd and the pictures-cum-text of Eddie Campbell (artist) and Alan Moore (writer). The distinctions multiply when we take into account the different formats and viewpoints in the novel (the first-person narrative of Lizbeth, the third-person narrative by a modern narrator, the trial transcript, the document presented as Lizbeth's husband's diary). However, both works employ similar approaches to increasing credibility through referentiality.

In *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, London is presented most emphatically in the first-person narrative and the diary, both of which in the end turn out to be the work of Lizbeth. In both cases, she also turns out to be a serial killer – mostly poisoning those she dislikes as herself and dissecting more or less random victims as her husband. In effect, she can hardly be considered a reliable narrator and it is difficult to treat her descriptions of London as objective. Nevertheless, there are some elements of the narrative which can be considered undistorted by emotional or personal bias.

Names are omnipresent in the novel, referring not only to characters, but also to places. Ackroyd puts great emphasis on clearly identifying the places he speaks of, pointing to their location in extratextual reality. This is done through the intense use of proper names of the streets the characters visit and the areas of London to which the narrative refers. In total, such place names appear on average on every other page, ensuring that the events can be transposed onto a map<sup>1</sup> and provide a seemingly objective grid of reference. In contrast to the uncertainty and openness to interpretation of the actions and persons in the novel, it would seem that the geography of London is the lowest common denominator of all representations of reality therein.

The geography of London also plays an important role in *From Hell*, as its protagonist – William Gull alias Jack the Ripper – plans to cement the rule of mankind over womankind by making offerings of women at five points of a pentagram superimposed onto the map of London. What's more, the graphic novel strives to be as faithful as possible to the established (and purported) facts concerning the 1888 murder spree, hence locations of key events are signaled by street names, usually either in the form of street plaques or statements by characters (i.e. directions to the driver of a carriage). Such direct naming is however rarer than in Ackroyd's novel. Various locations are simply drawn, often recognizable by one of the Hawksmoor churches crucial to the plot or some other attribute. The one exception is chapter four, with thirty pages devoted entirely to mapping elements of the pentagram within the

<sup>1</sup> In fact, they have: an interactive map is available at [londoninfiction.blogspot.com](http://londoninfiction.blogspot.com)

city, thus linking the natural and objective to the supernatural. Names also serve as a link between the past and present, as Gull elaborately explains the etymology and history of various elements of London.

The portrayal of London in novels, however, is in some ways by definition not fully objective. England's capital is mentioned as the key exponent of psychogeography in *The Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*. Psychogeography is defined therein as 'the study of a physical environment's effect on our thoughts, feelings and behavior.' (Auger 2010, p. 247).

*From Hell* allows for a psychogeographical reading of William Gull's actions and visions concerning the supernatural superstructure of London – as the effect of the city on a damaged brain/deranged mind and limited in their supernatural scope to his consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the Hawksmoor churches in particular are suggested to influence thoughts and behavior. In the case of *Dan Leno...*, a ritualistic value is endowed mostly on the site of Ratcliffe Highway murders (the street itself is named 22 times in the novel).

According to Elizabeth Ho, both texts' psychogeography thus provides 'a regenerative remapping of London according to ritual and violence, in order to create an alternate cartography to the "official" London made up of secularized, tourist landmarks' (Ho 2012, p. 22). Both writers are aware, however, of the media fanfare resulting from the actions of a serial killer and the flocking of people to murder sites. Although in *Dan Leno...* this is shown rather as short-lived excitement, Alan Moore repeatedly illustrates the transformation of crime into a product (including photographs, though not yet selfies, at the scene of the crime). It seems justified to ask whether the murder sites are in fact elements of an alternate cartography, or are they currently tourist landmarks themselves, if multiple Jack the Ripper tours compete for customers?

## London personified, London as a driving force

In both narratives London is treated as more than a background for the action taking place, but also as an agent. In *Dan Leno...* George Gissing writes of De Quincey's London in 'On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts' (1827) as 'a brooding presence behind, or perhaps even within, the murders themselves' and of the murderer, John Williams, as 'an avenging angel of the city' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 38). This can be understood as an impact of the changes in the city on its population. London is nevertheless portrayed as a driving force by the third-person narrator who declares that the 'new conditions of the metropolis required [...] some flagrant confirmation of its status as the largest and darkest city of the world'. The golem as 'an artificial life and a form without a spirit' is therefore presented as 'an em-

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, as the murderer's rituals result in flash forwards to the reality of offices in skyscrapers, Xerox machines, TVs, and Marilyn Monroe posters, recognizable to the reader as elements of the "real" future, it is difficult to fully discard them as fabrications of a Victorian mind.

blem of the city'. The killings are to be a part of the 'search for the secret of London itself' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 88). It is not clear, however, how they are to facilitate its finding – unless the secret is in fact the city's role as an agent.

London undoubtedly played a part in the creation of the novel itself. According to Jeremy Gibson and Julian Wolfreys, '[t]he structuring of the city, its performance, is at least in part, a response to the city's violent moments. Writing is thus shaped by London [...] [Ackroyd's] novel is readable as [...] an act of writing the city as a response to and dictated by the city' (2000, p. 173). Ackroyd's murderess, however, sees the city rather as a stage than a script or director. This viewpoint is later confirmed by Marx, identifying the streets as 'a theatre of oppression and cruelty' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 94). Such a description is much more anthropocentric, pointing to the human factor as the decisive element of what to present on stage.

A final, mystical theory of the role of London presented in *Dan Leno...* is the closest one to the one held by Stephen Gull. Those who believe in the legend of the Golem are said to believe that after the final murder took place in the same site as the one seventy years earlier, 'a secret ritual had been performed and that the clothes shop in the Ratcliffe Highway had once been some temple to a strange god. The Limehouse Golem had faded away [...] and would undoubtedly re-emerge in the same spot after a period of years' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 268). The portrayal of the murderer as a supernatural creature is elsewhere identified by John/Elizabeth as the return of mythology to London – 'if it ever really left it' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 191). Even Marx is shown to tend more towards the spiritual towards the end of his life, and these are the closest leads to those pointed to in Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's work.

London in *From Hell* is presented as a four-dimensional space, spreading not only horizontally (streets), but also vertically and in time (geological strata, including layers of blood and ash, buildings built upon the ruins of former buildings). Gull – taking the reader on a magical mystery tour of London – reads the city as a history of the subjugation of womankind and feels the need to reinforce this process by making an offering of women in five points of the city. This seemingly allows him to transcend the boundaries between the dimensions and see glimpses of the future. He thus goes further in '[t]ransforming time into space – the comic book's formal achievement since the early 1900s' (O'Malley 2012, p. 181), not only portraying the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension, but also travelling within it in atypical ways. If the realistic visions of the future (the reader's present) are not dismissed as hallucinations, London is shown to hold supernatural powers and to transgress linear time. The city does not only exist throughout the centuries but links them.

### **To each their own London**

One may ask, however, if there is only one London – not only in different centuries, but also at any given point in time. As I have mentioned, Ackroyd emphasizes the subjectivity of

perception through the use of first person narration and focalisation. In *From Hell*, it might seem that the narrative mode should be consistent as it graphically represents the actions taking place. However, Eddie Campbell makes interesting use of the form of the graphic novel to portray several Londons. I would postulate that there are subtle differences in the way reality is presented/perceived, depending on focalizer and objects portrayed.

Although Jean-Michel Ganteau writes of *Dan Leno...*, one can also say of *From Hell* that “[...] the observation of the city [...] keeps abiding by the rules of psychogeography, rejecting any distant, panoramic vision, and focusing on the architectural and human details, primarily the faces of the passers-by.” (2015, p. 158) One of the few panoramas of London in *From Hell* serves to underline the key role of the Hawksmoor churches and St Paul’s cathedral in the city, showing them as black spikes/obelisks, the only elements standing out from a pool of darkness. This (along with a few other bird’s eye view images of churches) is an exception, however, as nearly the whole narrative is presented from a human perspective. From that position, the black sea between the churches can be seen (and represented) in different ways.

### Figure 1

#### A panorama of nighttime London in *From Hell*



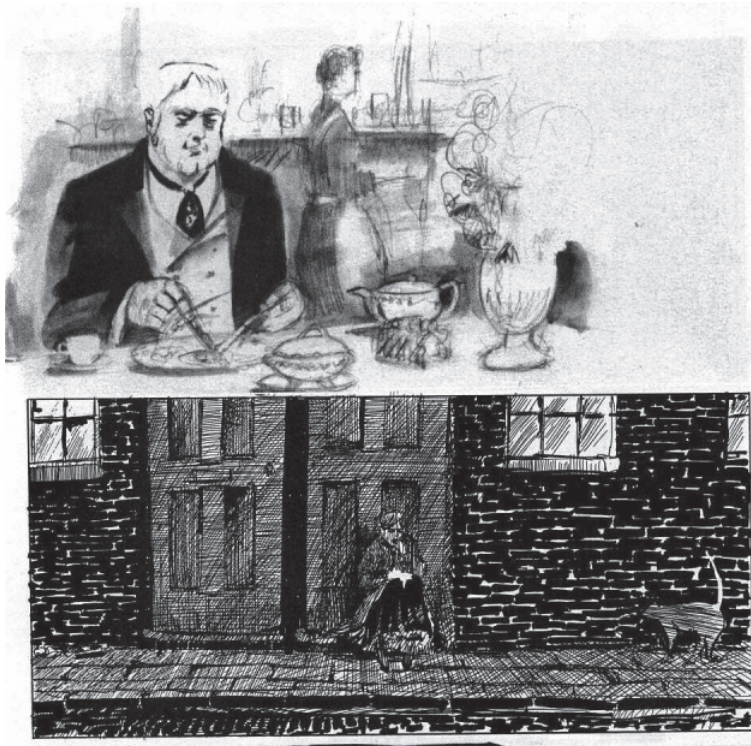
Source: Moore, Campbell (2000).



An interesting example of different Londons in Moore and Campbell's graphic novel is the portrayal of the same morning in two contexts in Chapter 5 through the parallel actions of William Gull and one of the prostitutes he is persecuting. As I mentioned elsewhere, 'while both characters do roughly the same things (wake up, wash, eat breakfast), the realities they function in are significantly different (e.g. the women are woken up by the rope holding them upright in sitting position being let loose while Gull stretches in his luxurious bed).' These differences of substance are reflected in a significant difference of form. "Gull's morning is portrayed in light blurred pictures (like black and white watercolors) with few sharp lines and some delicate shades of grey (though fewer than fifty). The poor women's sequence is presented in the same way as the majority of the comic: through blocks of blackness and sharp lines. The contrast is clear: the life in London streets is different from that of the more affluent citizens. While the latter can be soft and pleasant, the first one is stark and brutal" (Sulmicki 2014, p. 143).

**Figure 2**

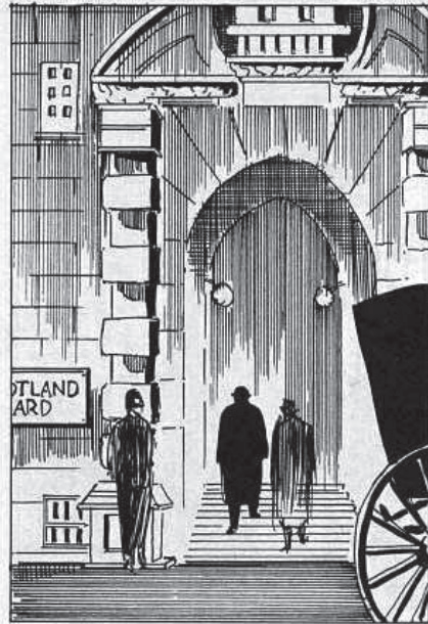
**Two different Londons in *From Hell***



Source: as in Figure 1.

Figure 3

Orderly, rectilinear London vs. the chaotic environment of the poor in *From Hell*



Source: as in Figure 1.

Ackroyd voices a similar sentiment when describing the streets of London as ‘a prison for those who walk in them’ (Ackroyd 2007, p. 93), by contrast to the relaxed role of the flâneur which can be adopted by those with a true, solid home. The function of streets for



the poor is also problematized in an earlier scene, wherein a prostitute assures her client that a chamberpot she filled with gin is clean. She declares that it never serves its traditional purpose as for that ‘we have the streets’ (Ackroyd 2007, p. 28). Similarly, Moore shows the lodgings of the poor mostly as temporary, uncertain and offering little comfort. The one more homely dwelling soon becomes the site of murder.

Campbell employs the ‘watercolor’ approach in only one chapter of the graphic novel, the rest of which may at first glance seem uniform, consisting of black-and-white drawings. One of Campbell’s most frequent graphic tropes is the use of lines to illustrate areas of shade, darkness or simply an unspecified background to a conversation. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that these lines are not uniform throughout the narrative. Although this is not always the rule, decorative, official buildings are usually illustrated with straight and even parallel lines, both to portray shadow and backgrounds inside. By contrast, most scenes involving the lower classes, including the interiors of their dwellings, are presented with much more chaotic lining. Churches can thus be seen as an element imposed onto the poor districts and alien thereto. This is confirmed by the fact that although the church in Spitalfields constantly appears in the background, the poor characters never enter it. By contrast, their London consists largely of lines that are crooked, uneven and often cross, leading to patches of blackness in the center and ragged rims.

As the narrative focuses on the murders of poor prostitutes, the dominating representation of shadow and darkness in London is a chaotic grid of lines, somewhat like the result

**Figure 4**

‘Slashed’ sky above the prostitute protagonist of *From Hell*



Source: as in Figure 1.



of a hectic slashing rampage by the artist. This is the dominant representation of nighttime London, presented as primarily the living and working area of prostitutes: ‘this class of person and their habitat’, as Queen Victoria puts it, when ordering Gull to murder four such persons (Moore and Campbell 2000, p. IV.3). However, even at night, London can be soft and pleasant, as can be seen in the closing panels of Chapter V, wherein Gull returns from a murderous outing. The journey by coach is again represented in soft ‘watermonochrome’, the background too bleary to identify, but rather not yet the home of the protagonist. The following closing panels of the chapter, representing Gull getting ready to sleep, are presented in the same fashion. This can be read to either symbolize the comfortable conditions (also in psychological terms, the feeling of a job well done) in which the scene is taking place, or as a signal of Gull’s schizophrenia. (He later claims not to remember what he did during his

**Figure 5**  
**William Gull at his workplace and in a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century workplace in *From Hell***



Source: as in Figure 1.

nighttime excursions, although it is difficult to reconcile such an explanation with the grand theory and plan he builds around the murders.)

One more example of the differentiation in portrayal of reality according to focalizer are Chapters II and X, which revolve solely around Gull. The first one is a summary of his life before the 1880s, the latter an extended portrayal of the ritual he conducts on the corpse of his final victim. In both cases, the backgrounds – rather than lined or slashed – are filled with a tightly woven perpendicularly crisscrossed pattern. Also, Chapter II is presented primarily from a first-person perspective – the reader sees what Gull sees, including his hands. The first cuts on the corpse in Chapter X are portrayed in a like manner, but for the remainder of the time the scenes present Gull from the outside. Both chapters include visions: of the supernatural, of the future. In Chapter II Gull has a stroke and sees Jahbulon, an alternate holy trinity. In Chapter X, he appears in the middle of a modern office, computers included, invisible to the office workers therein. This departure from realism would suggest that the weave-like background indicates that Gull is the focalizer and the reader sees what he sees. This does not fully do away with the supernatural aspects of the narrative, however, as two glimpses into the future (albeit both by Gull) are included in other chapters, drawn according to the ‘objective’ convention. As the protagonist notes, ‘this city in itself is a great work, a thing of many levels and complexities, it too is symbol, history and myth’ (Moore and Campbell 2000, p. IV.6). It is left to the reader to decide how symbolically and how ‘historically’ to treat these transgressions of time in London.

### The portrait of London: gray

The Londons of Ackroyd and Moore are not just Victorian, but neo-Victorian, due largely to such overt references to the present. This encourages comparisons between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> centuries, providing material for reflection on what has changed and what problems remain unsolved. These questions, presented in the context which engendered the ideas of socialism, seem all the more relevant in the light of the discussion concerning post-capitalism.

In *Dan Leno...*, several methods of alleviating poverty are mentioned. Karl Marx is presented as still frustrated with the fate of the poor, but nevertheless turning to poetry rather than actively advocating socialism. Another approach is indicated by Charles Babbage’s counting machine which George Gissing struggles to understand ‘in the context of Jeremy Bentham’s notion of “felicific calculus”’. The calculation of the impact of every decision on total happiness, is derided as ‘to be informed by statistics was neither to know nor to understand’ (Ackroyd 2007, pp. 113, 114). This seems to implicate the fallacy of modern economic and political systems, focused on GDP and various other percentages.

The narrator – via George Gissing – also predicts and criticizes the future, declaring that digitalization will drain life and spirit from the world – pointing to it as ‘perhaps [...] the

true Limehouse Golem' (Ackroyd 2007, p. 147). Such comments are sure to have additional resonance to today's reader, immersed in the digital world (the novel was written in 1994, a time when the world was much less computerized than it is today).

The same fears (or warnings) are voiced by William Gull in *From Hell* during his transgression into the future (which has already become our past)<sup>3</sup>. Modern man is condemned as 'morose, barbaric children playing joylessly with their unfathomable toys' (Moore and Campbell 2000, p. X.21) and numbed to all wonder, bereft of soul and yearning. Gull does not unequivocally elevate himself above such a future though, admitting to have become but a curio of a vanished epoch. After returning to his own time, he continues his rites, hoping perhaps to strengthen the supernatural and mystical and avoid such a future.

Ackroyd's London is less mystical, with the narration (especially that of the third-person narrator) resembling an essay and utilizing multiple quotations. It is interesting to set the scene of a large part of the novel, the British Library, against the declared problems of digitalization. John Cree, Karl Marx, George Gissing and others are all immersed in books at their desks, hardly noticing each other. They have access to information, but each seems to be enclosed in a cocoon, much like today's users of mobile phones.

The most spiritual experiences are those of Lizbeth witnessing variety shows. Alan Robinson sees this as a symbol of redemption, a solution to technocracy: 'although number crunching won't solve London's social problems, relief is at hand in the music-hall performances and songs of Ackroyd's Cockney visionary, Dan Leno' – 'a schematic anthithesis' to Babbage (2011, p. 158). However, before lancing into a critique of the modern overly technological and technocratic world, it should be noticed that both the main activists against the shift from spiritualism to materialism, Elizabeth Cree and William Gull, are mass murderers. Hardly an encouraging entourage. Both texts end with the punishment and death of the perpetrators, implying that order must result from chaos and justice must prevail.

Alan Moore closes the entire *From Hell* with an illustrated essay on the fallacy of the search for Jack the Ripper. On the last page, 'the dance of the gull catchers' is set against the dance of a stripper in the Ten Bells in 1998: 'the only real dance [always] going on [...] Poverty dance' (Moore and Campbell 2000, p. App.II.24). The continuity of prostitution as strip club performances implies that little progress has been made. However, strip clubs appear on the one hand to be becoming somewhat more civilized, and on the other to be losing popularity (cf. F. Mullin 2016). (To what extent, however, is this the impact of digitalization also on this sphere of life?) Workhouses have been replaced by more people-centered approaches to unemployment, and there is a discussion on universal basic income.

<sup>3</sup> Returning to the discussion of Campbell's drawing technique, it is interesting to note that the scenes of the future are largely bereft of shadows. The mostly black and white scene flooded in the light of fluorescent lamps can be said to illustrate contemporary times' blindness to the subtleties of the world.

On a larger scale, one may look at the changes which took place in the setting of a large part of both texts: the East End. The population of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets may have doubled since 1981 (from 140 to 285 thousand), but is still less than half that of its peak at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> (580 thousand inhabitants). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population quadrupled. Overcrowding and poverty characterized the area, as well as a high share of a Jewish population.

Currently, Tower Hamlets has one of the smallest indigenous populations in Britain. No ethnic group forms a majority of the population: 31% are indigenous White British (Tower Hamlets 2013, p. 5) – a sign of contemporary nomadic civilization, but also an echo of the Jewish settlement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tower Hamlets also has the highest proportion of children in poverty in the UK at 43% – although this number fell during the last two years, similarly to other London boroughs (cf. End Child Poverty 2014, 2016). Although its unemployment rate is one of the highest in London, it is below 9%. At the same time, the borough houses Canary Wharf – the seat of headquarters of various international banks and companies, as well as luxurious and ultra-modern residential properties. Progress is visible, but its rate is uneven. Time will tell to what extent the city will succeed in its felicific calculus. Both the texts discussed may serve as a reminder of the importance of the project.

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## **Dwie opowieści o jednym mieście: neowiktoriański Londyn w powieściach pt. *Prosto z piekła* Alana Moore'a oraz *Golem z Limehouse* Petera Ackroyda**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł zawiera analizę dwóch wizji neowiktoriańskiego Londynu: Petera Ackroyda w powieści pt. *Golem z Limehouse* oraz Alana Moora i Eddiego Campbella w powieści graficznej pt. *Prosto z piekła*. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono sposobom przedstawienia angielskiej stolicy i jej najbardziej charakterystycznych elementów. Ponadto, artykuł traktuje o uosobieniu miasta bądź jego traktowaniu jako siły napędowej ludzkich czynów, a także subiektywizacji miasta i traktowaniu go jako tekstu. Zwrócono również uwagę na superpozycję późnego wieku XIX z późnym wiekiem XX, tj. czasu akcji obu tekstów i czasu, w którym powstały, co stanowi punkt wyjścia do refleksji nad ich znaczeniem w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Londyn, Alan Moore, Eddie Campbell, Peter Ackroyd, literatura neowiktoriańska, powieść graficzna.

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