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## **The Monster Analogy: Why Fictional Characters are Frankenstein's Monsters**

Essi Varis

They are artificial human analogues; uncanny mirrors of humanity that mortals construct and bring to life for their own capricious purposes. Once they get off their creators' desks and gain minds of their own, however, there is little hope of controlling or destroying them. It is rather surprising that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818, 1831) has not repeatedly been interpreted as an allegory of fictional characters.

As this article will discuss, numerous literary theorists have foregrounded the paradoxical mimetic and artificial qualities of fictional characters, and the concurrent humanity and nonhumanity of Frankenstein's creation is even more difficult to ignore. Yet, never before have these dissonant beings been paralleled as closely as in *The Unwritten* (2009–2015), a metafictional fantasy comics series created for DC Comics' Vertigo imprint by writer Mike Carey and illustrator Peter Gross. The series, currently on hiatus, has so far centered on a mundane-seeming man called Tom Taylor, who discovers that he may, in fact, be a fictional character and that Frankenstein's monster – another abandoned creation – might therefore be the only entity who understands his existential sorrows. The comic explores many a resonant theme through this analogy, from the problems of identity and free will to the ethics of storytelling, which makes one wonder what would happen if these parallels were taken seriously; what if critical readings of *Frankenstein* were superimposed on different theoretical views on literary characters? Would this reveal previously ignored connections and disruptions between character theories, and thus benefit the current understanding of fictional entities? This article embarks to investigate these possibilities first by showing how Tom and Frankenstein's creature are paralleled in *The Unwritten*. This will serve as an introduction to the themes underlying and inspiring the more theoretical approach of the second section, which matches various structuralism-inspired, cognitive, and transmedial explanations of literary characters with the main plot points of *Frankenstein*.

In building these comparisons, I knowingly become the kind of Frankenstein that, according to Brian McHale (67–68), narratologists are wont to enact: I will stitch together a temporary theoretical chimera, following a predetermined formula. The result will unavoidably manifest some reductions and dissonances, but there is yet another parallel I wield as my defense: that readers, in trying to engage with fictional characters, are inclined to similar creative contortions, to forcing the nonhuman, artificial textual fragments into an illusory image of their own humanness. If nothing else, all these analogies and hybridizations make for an amusing thought experiment, and add another layer to the rich interpretation history of Mary Shelley’s 200-year-old magnum opus. However, if McHale is right, and narratology has always consisted of monstrous creations – models and histories combining irreconcilable elements into seemingly sensible shapes – this assembly of theories should fit in well with previous scholarship and suggest valid new ways of conceptualizing fictional characters.

### **Unwritten Creatures**

For the first few pages of *The Unwritten*, its protagonist Tom Taylor’s life seems very normal, even tedious – apart from the fact that his absent father, Wilson Taylor, is a world-famous fantasy author, who has, in the tradition of A.A. Milne, decided to base the main character of his best-selling book series on him (*TU* #3, [10]<sup>1</sup>). This series of *Tommy Taylor* books and the hype surrounding it bear many and deliberate similarities to the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, and have ironically rewritten Tom’s relatable and average identity into something extraordinary and iconic. The second scene of the series is set at “London Tommycon”, where Tom is giving autographs and interviews to the public that identifies with his – or rather, his fictional avatar Tommy’s – apparent blandness, which only serves to mask exceptional potential to magic (#1, [4–6]). Tom’s half-reluctant celebrity routine is, however, interrupted unexpectedly when an audience member demands to know why many of the documents pertaining to his identity and childhood appear to be fabricated. And so, from this simple question – “who are you?” – unravels a wildly intertextual and metafictional journey of 66 issues, during which Tom endeavors to find out whether he is a real person or a fictional character; the “Tom Average” he thinks he is, or the Messianic boy wizard his father made him out to be (*TU* #1, [9]). Simply put, the series plays with the audiences’ evolutionally wired tendency to discuss and react to the fates of fictional characters as if they were real, minded entities with dreams and pains, hungers and futures (see e.g. Vermeule x, Zunshine 58). Although such overtly mimetic readings are commonly seen as fallacies in academic contexts, they appear oddly reasonable in the context of *The Unwritten*, where different levels of reality and textuality are constantly blurred together through stacked metalepses, concretized allusions, and crowds of borrowed characters.

The first 35-issue story arc, which concentrates specifically on Tom's identity crisis, finds especially close kinship with another story that comments on the fundamental issues of humanity and identity: the story of Frankenstein. When the Creature – as he asks to be called (#30, [15]) – appears to aid Tom, the readers are given an abundance of visual cues by which to recognize him (*TU* #3 [1-2]): his bulky frame towers over regular men, his gaze is darkened by a prominent, primitive brow, and his greenish, "shriveled complexion" (*F* 35) is riddled with scars. All these grotesque traits have been immortalized and added to our visual vocabulary by Boris Karloff's iconic performance in the Universal films of the 1930s (Baldick 5), but a more systematic analysis of every scene involving the character reveals that *The Unwritten* also recreates many such aspects of Shelley's original vision that most visual adaptations exclude. The Creature speaks, for instance, announcing his deeply ambivalent feelings towards his own existence (*TU* #7), and displays superhuman endurance of Arctic conditions (*TU* #32). Yet some other features of *The Unwritten's* Creature reference neither the films nor the novel: "lustrous black, flowing hair" (*F* 35) is reduced to baldness, and – almost as a compromise between the novel's eloquence and the films' muteness – the Creature is made taciturn. He only speaks in about half of the panels in which he appears. These unorthodox traits may point towards other, less-known influences, which would render this version of the Creature a self-referential amalgamation of amalgamations befitting the series' poetics – as noted above, Tom, too, is an interfigural combination of Frankenstein's Creature, Christopher Robin, and Harry Potter (cf. Müller 115). Alternatively, these traits could mark growth and change, underlining that the Creature is no longer a newborn in a monstrous body but his two centuries of survival have molded him into a reliable, if melancholy, mentor figure.

There is another, even more important function the Creature serves in the series, however, the role he is made, and perhaps most known for: that of a foil or a mirror. Indeed, the series starts piling parallels between Tom and the Creature even before the two meet: like Mary Shelley – and John Milton before her – Tom's father has spent productive periods in Villa Diodati, the Swiss mansion where the fabled ghost story competition between Lord Byron, John Polidori, and the Shelleys took place in the summer of 1816 (Mazzarella 56-64; Shelley "Introduction"). As Tom (*TU* #2, [18]) phrases it, "-- Satan and Frankenstein were both born in the same house. Not to mention – you know – Tommy Taylor." In the early chapters of *The Unwritten* (*TU* #2-3), Tom returns to this notable childhood abode of his, in order to consult with his father, but finds instead a group of horror authors, who have gathered in the villa for an exclusive writing convention. As if history could not resist repeating itself, this convention of creatives, coinciding with a thunderstorm, "awakens" the Creature from its dormant state (*TU* #6, [22]), and endows Tom with some of his fictional alter

ego's physical calling cards: Tommy the boy wizard's compass tattoo inexplicably appears on the back of his hand, and a winged cat familiar, which should only exist in his father's books, starts following him around (*TU* #2, [22]; #4, [22]).

This simultaneity of awakenings is no coincidence, as the gift of magic in the *Tommy Taylor* books bears the same moniker as the gift of life in *Frankenstein*: "the spark". Frankenstein remembers "infus[ing] the spark of being into the lifeless thing" at the end of his feverish toil (*F* 35), while the characters and fans of *Tommy Taylor* series assert their belief in magic by chanting: "All who have the spark must protect and stand by the spark" (*TU* #8, [12]). In both cases, the spark transforms the characters into something unnatural and paradoxical: a collage of corpses, a "lifeless thing", should not be walking and talking – even though he is – just like someone who lives as though he is a tangible, free-willed person should not also be a fictional character – and yet he is.

This "counterontological" condition of being dead but living, human but nonhuman, real but fictional, and minded but artificial derives from Tom and the Creature's unnatural origins<sup>2</sup>: they both began as ordinary people, until "some guy with a god complex" (*TU* #30, [16]) decided to rearrange their physical and mental tissues, and bestow them with the "spark". Although Frankenstein refuses to describe his method in detail, its main principles are known to include "collect[ing] bones from charnel houses" and assembling them into a human-like shape (*F* 34–35, 151). Subsequently, the Creature continues his creator's collage-work on a cognitive level, by consuming an eclectic mass of fictional and philosophical texts (*F* 88–92). As Michael Holquist (94) notes, "Frankenstein's monster springs from the library as much as he does from the charnel house and laboratory: he is made up not only of other bodies from the past but – – from other books from the past." Wilson Taylor skips directly to this second phase: before long, the series reveals that Tom is, indeed, the writer's biological son but has, throughout his childhood, been subliminally force-fed carefully selected textual material while floating sedated in a sensory deprivation tank (*TU* #22, [16]; #23, [1]). The series' antagonist mockingly names the tank a "Frankenstein machine" and the "second womb" (#35, [17]), whereas Wilson Taylor himself refers to the process as "shaping", "making" or arming Tom to serve his purposes (*TU* #16, [5]). Upon finding his half-brother, who has gone through similar procedures, Tom compares the treatment directly to painful medical operations: "You know, Wilson was a **rotten** father to both of us. --/ I **know** what it's like. To be laid out on a slab and **dissected**, when you're still alive. / To grow up in a glass **jar** on a shelf of a fucking laboratory."<sup>3</sup> (*TU* #30, [16].) In the end, Tom's mind is so meshed with stories that his DNA is not identifiable as that of a human's any longer (#26, [16–17]).

Once Tom and the Creature learn that they have been manufactured, rather than born, they also realize that they exist for a designed function, rather than for their own sake. Even though their many person-like qualities seem to warrant an ascription of a mind and an elusive, complex “essence” – which should be allowed to unfold through the course of their individual growth, as Shelley’s mother’s critique of Rousseau’s educational ideals would demand (Baldick 38) – the fact that they are purposefully crafted likens them to artefacts, “which are generally synonymous with their functions” (Zunshine 7). That is, Tom and the Creature “straddle the respective domains of artefacts and living creatures” (Zunshine 75), and the cognitive dissonance resulting from the clash of these two categories is so momentous the readers must resolve it in one way or another – by sorting Tom and the Creature back into dead, moldable matter, or by granting them full, independent personhood. Both characters usher the reader towards the latter of these “cognitively satisfying” options by rebelling against their functions, and the makers who assigned them (Zunshine 86): although neither Tom nor the Creature commits a direct patricide, they do assert their own will both verbally and violently, and ultimately outlive their father-creators (*F* 101–104, 120–121; *TU* #15–16). This loosens their creaturely bonds and the reader’s cognitive tension contextually, as demonstrations of agency and emotion triumph over the discourses and circumstances that would foreground their artefactual provenance. This does not erase the memory or the consequentiality of the essentialist categories the readers have first assigned to the characters, however: something that is not made human can never be perceived as truly human, and something made for a purpose can never be truly free of that purpose (Zunshine 79–85).

This inescapable power of origins is well illustrated through the naming of the characters. While the Creature’s namelessness functions as a symbolic scar that forever marks his unusual birth, both Tommy Taylor’s and his inspirational predecessor Harry Potter’s surnames refer back to handicraft: a potter makes things out of clay and a tailor makes things out of fabric. Tom Taylor’s mother, Sue Morganstern, does not only pay homage to *Frankenstein* through her Miltonic surname, but she also does ceramics for living (*TU* #2, [10]). For anyone who remembers *Frankenstein’s* subtitle, this is quickly connected to the Greek Titan Prometheus who, according to one myth, fashioned the humankind out of clay. As for Tom’s father Wilson Taylor, he does not work with fabric but, as a writer, he does *fabricate* things. Insofar as clay is the mythical matter of man and yarn a figurative synonym for plot, it makes sense that these two would spin an artificial golem-child out of myths and stories.

The themes of creation and paternal control associated with it are further accentuated by paralleling both characters with Biblical figures, whose all-powerful creator also puts them through considerable ordeals, assumedly for the greater good. Tom and his

fictional avatar Tommy Taylor are wrought for the Messianic role of the sacrificial lamb, or “the word made flesh” (*TU* #1, [19, 31]), while Frankenstein’s creature famously confesses identifying with Lucifer from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (*F* 90). Fittingly, the first meeting between Tom and the Creature takes place in a prison chapel, in front of a crucifix, which prompts the Creature to articulate many of the aforementioned parallels:

I understand your **dilemma**. It is frightening to think of the world as having no firm foundations. Frightening to meet one’s **maker**. /And to find him...unsatisfactory. /-- You. And myself. We have that in **common**. We are **creatures**. Made things. And those who made us do not **love** us. / -- I speak for those wrought and shaped by mortal men. For **monsters**. (*TU* #7, [2].)

Although Tom rejects these notions at first, he gradually internalizes them: by issue #30 ([16]), the foregrounded crucifix is replaced with a foregrounded Creature, and Tom repeats the thoughts of his enigmatic mentor to his stepbrother: “We are both *him*.”

This avowal might, at a glance, seem baffling against the most common conceptions of monstrosity, as neither of the half-brothers have any physical deformities that would qualify them as monsters in a visual sense, for instance. Abject physical traits have been associated with evil and danger since the Middle Ages, which is why many critics harbor a dislike for visual adaptations of *Frankenstein*: they worry that the shock-horror spectacle of the Creature’s creation or his grotesque appearance might evoke visceral fear and disgust responses that could inhibit more nuanced and sustained character engagement (Baldick 10–14; Mazzarella 172–73). Even the Creature itself is aware of the social obstacle its forbidding form constitutes, and tries to befriend a blind man before approaching any seeing humans (*F* 92–94). As a comic, *The Unwritten* is one of the adaptations that robs the readers of this mercifully blind position. Yet, it is also quick to disparage “mere grotesques” and “ersatz Hollywood zombie[s]”, and explicitly evokes social explanations of monstrosity instead: several characters, including Wilson Taylor, maintain that nothing is “born evil” but monsters are made by “neglect” (#3, [6]; #21, [10–11]). Since both Tom and the Creature are mistreated and abandoned by their father-creators this is, indeed, another trait they share, but it can hardly be separated from the unusual circumstances of their birth: perhaps those who made them do not love them, because “things” are rarely made to be loved; they are made to be used.

According to *The Unwritten*, the Creature, Tom, and – by extension – every fictional character walk the tightrope between reality and unreality, artificiality and humanity, predetermined functionality and rebellious agency. As this violates some of the most

basic terms by which we make sense of the world (Zunshine 66), creatureness in itself can be characterized as monstrous, a cognitively threatening and fascinating aberration. The next chapter explores how fictional characters, an entire species of anthropomorphic “made things”, have been defined and theorized through this type of monstrosity.

### **Theoretical Monsters**

In his capacity as a fictional character, the Creature is anything but neglected, as *Frankenstein* continues to invite ever new academic readings and artistic reinterpretations. According to many theorists, the secret to this lasting interest lies in the instabilities inherent in the novel’s meanings and characters: the various embedded narrators and intertextual intersections amount to rather ambiguous messages about creation, humanity, and death, which the growing number of adaptations and reimaginings across media have further stretched towards new, even contradictory directions (see e.g. Baldick 2–5, 58–62; Botting 3, 37; Mazzarella 6–9; Vidal 94). As a result, the story of Frankenstein has become so protean it could mean almost anything. “[T]here is nothing to prevent critics from remaking the Creature in whatever image they wish”, Paul Sherwin (889–90) remarks, and lists that the monster has so far been interpreted as a Freudian, Lacanian, Blakean and Wordsworthian figure, as well as from several Romanticist, Marxist, structuralist, religious and biographical perspectives. More recent publications have since added at least queer, ecocritical and posthumanist readings to the cavalcade (Smith).

These shifting meanings, along with Levi-Strauss’ theorizations, have led Chris Baldick (2–4) to grant Frankenstein’s tale the oxymoronic title of “a modern myth”. By this Baldick means that Shelley’s novel has given a powerful formulation to the core narratives of creation and rebellion that have recurred across human cultures since before Prometheus and *The Bible*. From this follows that, according to Baldick (3), the gist of the novel can be distilled into just two basic actions – or Aristotelian “mythos” – which are concise and recognizable enough to evoke or embed in copious contexts: “(a) Frankenstein makes a living creature out of bits of corpses. (b) The creature turns against him and runs amok.”

Despite approaching the tale from an entirely different perspective – that of Bakhtin’s dialogism – another theorist, Michael Holquist, has unearthed largely similar patterns, only he distinguishes a third phase between the creation and the rebellion: “the second creation”. Holquist observes that when the Creature opens its eyes, it is still very “unfinished”, a tabula rasa with little more than a huge body and vast potential (*F* 70–71). It still needs to “metamorphose” itself into a fully minded, self-aware individual, and the main prerequisite for this is the acquisition of language. Thus, the Creature



becomes a person – or rather, a round character that invites the attribution of consciousness – only gradually, as it eavesdrops the de Lacey family in their cottage and, especially, as it studies “the Pandoran portmanteau”, an incidental stash of books it finds in the woods. The act of reading is what allows the Creature to become aware of the unbridgeable gap between humankind and himself – which then leads to his rebellion. (Holquist 90, 96, 98.)

So as not to get lost in the labyrinthine folds and turns of the myriad critical readings of *Frankenstein* – or to over-interpret any small, convoluted details – I will continue to cross-read *The Unwritten, Frankenstein*, and a selection of literary character theories through the following synthesis of Baldick’s and Holquist’s distillations:

- a. Frankenstein makes a living creature out of bits of corpses.
- b. The creature develops a mind of its own through reading.
- c. The creature turns against its creator and runs amok.

Having organized and reorganized an increasing number of different character theories according to this model half a dozen times, in previous drafts and conference papers, I find that the most compelling narrative the analogy generates is a heuristic, pseudo-chronological tale of the progression of literary character theory: the structuralism-inspired limb-collecting has slowly been replaced by cognitive approaches, which observe how the readers bestow the characters with the spark of life. The third, transmedial turn of character theory, where the multimodal creations escape the creative control of their authors and procreate across media cultures, has only started to gain momentum, however. The present discussion also excludes some, especially less extensive and Francophone, approaches to character, whose inclusion might have made a slightly different ordering of theories more interesting or productive. Indeed, this monstrous analogy is not meant to provide any definitive answers or models but to encourage new ways of evaluating and connecting previous theories of fictional characters.

#### **a.) Structural and Mimetic Creations**

-- but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man. -- After having formed this determination, and having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began. -- A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent beings would owe their being to me. -- I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. (F 32-34.)

This is how Victor Frankenstein recounts the beginning of his misadventure: it starts with an ambition, a pile of “materials”, and an idealized vision of humanness. Character theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century echo similar interests, as they have mostly been preoccupied by the roles characters fulfill in the larger schemes of things, by their structural constituents, and, paradoxically, by their deceptive human-likeness.

As Roland Barthes (256) sums, most formalist and structuralist theories follow the Aristotelian notion that character is merely “the agent of an action”, “entirely subordinated” to the plot – and hence to the author and text that originate it. Just like Frankenstein does not account for any troublesome idiosyncrasies but envisions a perfect, obedient creature, Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas envision characters not as “beings” or “essences”, but as convenient automatons that “participate” in whatever actions are required of them in the “paradigmatic structure[s]” of plots and scenarios. According to them, characters should not be defined by what they are but by what they will always predictably do – because that is, in the end, *all* they are: heroes, villains, and bogus heroes, or actors grouped into actants (Barthes 256–58, Chatman 110–114). All in all, theories that approach characters through different agential categorizations tend to employ heavy “functionalist language” (Zunshine 89–100), which reduces characters into simple storytelling tools.

Seymour Chatman (111–112) takes issue with such function-driven approaches, because they dismiss all the meaningful differences between characters – even “appearance, age, sex or life concerns” – as “mere differences”. Readers, Chatman (112) claims, can also “appreciate character traits for their own sake”, not to mention that plenty of poststructuralist approaches to narratives specifically focus on the ways different characters portray traits like gender or ethnicity. Thus, from the 1980s to early 1990s, most theorists turned from functions and categorizations to examining the traits (Chatman), narrative techniques (Hochman), semiotic codes (Fokkema) and (inter)textual constituents (Müller) that form individual characters. These approaches have the advantage of allowing quite concrete analysis of characters’ textual anatomy, and the disadvantage of only examining them one slice or limb at a time. They thus only constitute the first step of Frankenstein’s genius or, worse yet, reverse it: when discussing characters one rarely rips them into separate words, frames or traits but refers to their nebulous, oddly vivacious sum. This becomes especially apparent in the context of comics, where characterization – like the rest of the storytelling – rests on various verbal and visual fragments, which may be created by several people and spread across several issues, series, or products. Text boxes and speech bubbles become the burial vaults; lines, shapes and colors the charnel-houses that the reader must rummage through in order to form a coherent view of the characters.

Thus, while trait theories are useful dissection tools, they only transfer the functionalist language of function-driven theories to a more minute level: they may not reduce characters into constituents of larger narrative structures but they view characters themselves as stable, artificial, purposeful structures. This does not quite grant them any spark of life, as Baruch Hochman (60) recognizes: before slicing his fictional specimen with eight characterization binaries – from stylization vs. naturalism to coherence vs. incoherence – he likens characters to “dead people”. The reasoning behind this statement is that literary creations are not as much “the unwritten” as the-already-written: whereas real people generate a chaotic plethora of data about themselves and remain open-ended constructions until they die, the amount of “information” available on fictional people is teleological, limited, and purposefully organized by the author.

Yet, at the same time, Hochman (62) insists on the characters’ likeness to humans, calling them not only “dead people”, but also “possible people”, and even “*Homo Fictus*” – a new Frankensteinian genus! Indeed, despite the prevalent functionalist rhetoric of early theories, referring to characters simply as representations of “people” or “persons” has always been the focal point of any and all definitions of character (Chatman 107–8, Varis 13). This has guided, for instance, Aleid Fokkema’s semiotic theory, which endeavors to pinpoint the laws or “codes” by which all the aforementioned signs, traits, and other pieces of character are assembled. She infers that enhancing the characters’ “mimetic effect” requires constructing them according to sets of overtly humanizing presuppositions: like people, characters usually pertain to basic logical premises (“logical code”), seem to possess biological bodies (“biological code”), appear to entertain “inner worlds” (“psychological code”), and form (para-)social networks with fellow creatures (“social code”) (Fokkema 74–75.)

This is not to say that these building blocks of humanity could not be manifested to a varying degree in different characters, as Frankenstein’s creature himself illustrates. Biologically, he is made of human materials, has a human face, a human shape, and a human brain. He does not have biological parents, however, and his sole creator designed him not exactly as human, but as superhuman, “an animal as complex and wonderful as man”, but one that is “proportionably large”, “beautiful” and “invulnerable to any but a violent death” (F 23, 32–33). In the novel and in James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) alike, the Creature demonstrates high-level human-like cognition and self-awareness, when he identifies with his own reflection in a pool (F 78–79). In addition, he mediates his inner world to the other characters through eloquent speeches that involve moral judgements, another hallmark of humanity. His final address to Captain Walton, for example, is peppered with words like “pity”, “remorse”, “sympathy”, “vice” and “virtue” (F 158–161). Yet, socially he

is not labeled a person but a "monster", a "fiend", an "insect", a "devil" and a "daemon" (F 68). This prompts the Creature himself to state that even Lucifer "had friends and associates in his desolation", whereas he is utterly alone. (F 160).

These hits and misses reaffirm Fokkema's (186-190) conclusion that although fiction could always confound any of these anthropomorphic expectations, abandoning them completely is surprisingly rare, perhaps even impossible, as the ontologically incommensurate categories of characterness and personhood are so closely intertwined. Indeed, Fokkema's analysis of postmodern novels shows that even the most experimental, intentionally flat or incoherent characters always retain some human qualities. She names such counterontological hybrids "borderline characters" (186-190), reminiscent of the scene in *The Unwritten* (#30, [14]) where the Creature states that Tom and himself - who could both be described as rather experimental characters in their respective contexts - "belong" on "the boundary", "the threshold" between humanity and nonhumanity, stories and reality. Similarly, Sherwin (892) seizes on Frankenstein's habit to call its creature a "daemon", a "marginal or boundary being" between "nature and supernature, objectivity and subjectivity".

It seems that fictional characters cannot be pinned down with a single approach any more than Frankenstein's Creature can. Although nobody denies that characters are parts of larger artistic structures - and can and should be analyzed as such - even structuralists admit that they also seem to take on "psychological consistency" (Barthes 256), a human surplus that exceeds all purely formal analyzes. Indeed, even though the heritage of new criticism has imprinted literary criticism with a lasting belief that thinking of characters as complete persons is naïve (Chatman 116-117; Hochman 16; Vermeule x), evaluating and classifying characters by their psychological depth and likeness to real people has still remained so common it is the cornerstone to, for instance, E. M. Forster's (73-89) influential classification of characters. These contradictory standards for what makes a good character and what makes a good character analysis have troubled the character theorists to the point they could be divided into two camps: those emphasizing the functional roles and those emphasizing the human qualities of characters (Fokkema 18-41; Varis 14-20).

Thankfully, some theorists have started to twist the strands of this double helix together. Fokkema's theory reportedly attempts such a synthesis, but James Phelan's rhetorical theory, proposed around the same time, has proved more applicable. It contains the counterontological tensions between functionality and humanity simply by conceptualizing characters around this very contradiction. That is, according to Phelan (2-3), all characters necessarily have both a mimetic and a synthetic aspect. Only the realization of these potentials seesaws, so that a character might, either

consistently or momentarily, be presented more prominently as person while the constructional, artificial aspect takes the backseat, or vice versa. Phelan's theory thereby declares all characters "borderline characters" in Fokkema's sense: if characters are "representations of persons", they must always be both representations and persons. Should they lose one or the other of these aspects they would not be considered characters anymore. Thus, they are not exactly analogous to humans, as Hochman proposes, but to Frankenstein's monster, as *The Unwritten* proposes: there is no need to decide whether they should be considered as skillfully crafted plot mechanisms or as startlingly relatable mock-humans because they are, by definition, both. Most character theories have, in fact, described characters with phrases like "double vision" or "double nature", or at least heavily implied some type of duality in their definitions and analyses (Fokkema 42-43; Hochman 72; Schneider 607; Varis 36-37). This acceptance of dissonant but concurrent aspects also forms an unsung basis for the cognitively-slanted character theories discussed in the next subchapter.

### **b.) Cognitive Second Creation**

As I read -- I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. (F 89.)

Although Frankenstein considers his creation finished the second it opens its eyes, the Creature itself can scarcely make sense of the flood of stimuli assaulting its senses at that moment. It starts to distinguish "sensations from each other" and understanding the world around it "gradually" (F 70-71), and only after reading *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Paradise Lost*, as well as Frankenstein's lab notes, he finally understands his place in the world; he builds himself a self - metamorphoses from an uninterpretable "it" into a minded "him" - by reading. Similarly, in *The Unwritten*, Tom owes his tortured selfhood to the reception of texts he was force-fed in the "second womb" of the sensory deprivation tank. In Wolfgang G. Müller's (116) terms, this makes both Tom and the Creature "reading protagonists", dual figures positioned as both the objects and subjects of reading and character engagement. As Holquist (99-100) notes, the Creature is repeatedly "misread" at face value, or interpreted "too literally" as a monster by the other characters, which prompts him "to author another version of himself" for the blind De Lacey and Frankenstein alike (F 68. 92-94). In parallel, one of Wilson Taylor's strategies in molding Tom is the complete rewriting of him as the heroic, exceptional Tommy. In this way, both *Frankenstein* and *The Unwritten* engage in metafictional commentary on the textual construction of the characters by the authors, as well as on the cognitive (re)construction of them by the readers.

The latter issue especially has also been the focus of recent cognitive approaches to characters. Ralf Schneider's cognitive model, for instance, attempts to explain how the pieces of characters are sewn together – much like Fokkema's semiotic theory does – but he hands the needle completely to the readers, who, according to him, build "mental models" of characters while reading – just like Tom and the Creature build ideas of themselves in interaction with texts. Frankensteinian sewing is an especially apt metaphor for what Schneider calls "bottom-up processing", where "bits of textual information are kept in working memory separately and integrated into an overall representation at a later point in time" (Schneider 611, 625). As Hochman (60) rightly notes, however, the information that any work in any medium can provide of any given character is unavoidably limited; no page nor screen could ever be assumed to capture the entirety of any real person, which is why the portrayals of characters can, by analogy, be viewed as incomplete. Therefore, in order to form mimetic, coherent characters the reader must complement the gap-ridden textual information with his or her "encyclopedic" knowledge reserves (Eder et al. 11–12; Jannidis). It is never once mentioned in Shelley's original text that the Creature has a stomach, or an abdomen or a torso, for instance, but as evidenced by visual adaptations of the character, most readers have still succeeded in attaching his limbs in their rightful places, in a normal humanlike fashion. This must have been achieved by drawing from a knowledge structure resembling Fokkema's biological code. In other words, this supplementary world-knowledge is the yarn that enables the readers to close the seams between the incomplete pieces of character information. Schneider (619–24) calls this type of sewing "top-down processing": when reading, one always activates "pre-stored knowledge structures", such as schemata of literary stock characters or social stereotypes, which can then be "tested" and individuated with further textual information.

Although literary theorists rarely pay any attention to it, this cognitive fusing of textual and real-life information must take place in the reception of other media as well. Even if Scott McCloud's (e.g. 156) ideas about readerly "closure" – the active imagining of what might reside between gutters and simplified lines – have been contested several times, it appears quite unlikely that anyone would truly perceive Tintin, or any other comic book character, as a two-dimensional being with little black beads for eyes. The CGI rendition of the leading actor Jamie Bell's features in Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson's animation film *The Adventures of Tintin: Secret of the Unicorn* admittedly match Hergé's *ligne claire* designs quite well, but the visual detail the adaptation adds does not necessarily amount to the exact replica of what each reader had imagined Tintin to look like. Hence, some might have reacted to the adaptation more negatively than others. This indicates that the readers of comics must have added something to the data provided by the stylized drawings.

Cognitive narratology has already moved forward from Schneider's initial mental model theory but the Creature's description of its reading experience still remains valid: study of the so-called "theory of mind" – which, incidentally or not, is often abbreviated "ToM" – has established that when reading, we indeed "apply" much to our own "feelings and condition": the same evolved social faculties that allow readers to make sense of their fellow humans are also used to "mind-read" fictional characters (see e.g. Leverage 1-2; Vermeule, Zunshine 58-62). Marco Caracciolo's experiential approach expands on this now-prevalent view of character engagement by suggesting that textual cues can coax the readers not only into attributing minds to (human-like) characters but also into enacting their experiences in a more holistic and empathetic way. That is, as the text describes what the character experiences, the reader may activate memory traces of his or her own approximate real-life experiences. This amounts to a "story-driven experience", which is – paradoxically – simulated or enacted by the reader but attributed to the character, so that the reader's first-person experiencing partially coincides with his or her third-person ascription of a mind to an imagined creature. This allows the reader to, indeed, "partly understand" the character's imaginary mind, to assume some aspect of the characters' perspective but still consider it a separate fictional being: "the overlap between the story-driven experience and consciousness attribution -- can never be complete", just as the counterontology of character can never be fully reconciled. (Caracciolo 122-23; see also Vermeule 40-45.)

On one hand, this forever-partial overlap makes characters safe vehicles for "trying on" different experiences "off-line", without having to act on any of the thoughts and emotions they, nevertheless, are able to evoke (Vermeule 45). On the other hand, allowing any creature any, even illusory, capacity to "think" can lead to unpredictability, conflict and loss of authorial control: an interview study conducted with adult fiction writers revealed that over 90 percent of creative writers on different professional levels have at some point experienced "the illusion of independent agency", or felt that their characters seemed to "have minds of their own". This phenomenon, the researchers hypothesize, is likely caused by the kind of attributions and enactments Caracciolo describes, if they can also run on an automatized, preconscious level. (Taylor et al. 361-63, 378; Vermeule 46.)

Conscious or preconscious, the readers' cognitions seem to be what truly lends the characters the Frankensteinian spark, an uncanny semblance of life. The downside is that these approaches entail a major methodological problem: that every reader's experiential background or encyclopedic knowledge reserve is as unique and difficult to grasp as their life history (cf. Caracciolo 42, Jannidis). From this follows, that even

if every reader is handed the same textual information, each one is bound to interpret or enact it differently in different situations, putting more or less effort into the task. As a result, the character as a live, minded, experiencing entity unravels into countless disparate, private, shifting mental models and fleeting, imaginary experiences that, indeed, flare and vanish like sparks. If the character is redefined like this – if they are not embedded in texts but suspended between texts and readings of them – how can they be dissected with any methods of literary research?

The act of reading, then, has two equally crucial but nearly opposing consequences. On the one hand, the cognitive process of reading allows the readers – and the Creature itself – to sew all the mismatched elements and traits into a coherent, human-like whole. On the other hand, the characters are thereby half-equated with these evanescent, subjective processes, which keep recombining the textual fragments with other, pre-existing information in always new and different ways, to suit different contexts and desires. As a result, mimetic humanity becomes as elusive to the character theorists as it is to the Creature. Indeed, Botting (4) and Sherwin (889–891) describe the Creature as a “wandering signifier”, “a genius of liminality”, whose “principal virtue is virtuality” and who “operates along the borders of narrative and linguistic indeterminacy, traversing the indefinite boundaries which police the differences constitutive of meaning” – but does describing characters in the same terms constitute a workable theoretical model?

On the one hand, this problem may, indeed, be exacerbated by the aforementioned, necessary “gappiness” of fictional characters. As both Frankenstein critics and comics theorists are happy to reiterate, blank spaces – from lacking proper names to the gutters of comics – are extremely productive in their undefined chaos; they invite creativity from the recipient’s part, increasing the amount of encyclopedic knowledge employed, and the number of ways of employing it (see e.g. Botting 68–69; McCloud). On the other hand, this “problem of other minds” (see e.g. Caracciolo 21) is by no means unique to our understanding of fictional characters. In *The Unwritten* (#28, [12]), Wilson Taylor views real people – or characters who are as real as he is – in exactly the same way: “Far as I can see, we mostly exist as **ideas** in each other’s heads. The way **you** see me. The way my **boss** sees me. The way the **waitress** at Lindy’s sees me. Skins on an **onion**, right? Except that’s all there is to us. The **skins**.” This generalization of the problem across the ontological boundaries, from fictional to real people, does not solve it, of course, but it hands it over to mind-scientists and philosophers of mind to ponder. Meanwhile, literary theorists can continue to build their theories around this unsolved “heart of darkness”, just like the analyses and retellings of *Frankenstein* (151) are motivated by its eponymous scientists’ refusal to disclose his method of resurrection (Botting 4).



The focus can still remain on the readers, whose cognitive work is, in any event, what forms and experiences all these singular versions of characters. Thomas Docherty's (xiv–xvi) character theory similarly discards the idea of characters as "established product[s]" or essences, and suggests viewing *both* the character and the reader as series of dynamic, incomplete, mismatched subjectivities instead. Although this proposal for monstrous fragmentation is more inspired by (post)structuralism and the incoherent, nameless characters of postmodern novels than by the slipperiness of cognitive processes, Docherty also posits the reader as the true Frankenstein, or the "center of consciousness" that ultimately "makes piecemeal sense" of the "fragmentary instants of subjectivity" (Docherty 30–31, 157). The *Unwritten*, meanwhile, goes on to sum "the minds of all the millions of people who read" into a "collective unconscious", which is not defined in reference to Carl Jung, however, but likened to Hobbes' Leviathan: just like the "power of a nation" derives from all of its people, so does Tom as a fictional yet agential entity ultimately "exist in the suspension of [the audience's shared] disbelief". (*TU* #23, [1, 17].)

In the light of cognitive character theories, fictional creatures have thus become "wandering signifiers", private and social processes of perception that do not dwell on desolate wastes of paper and ink anymore. Nor have they ever truly done so: Baruch Hochman (72) already noted in 1985 that characters pose a "paradox of utter embeddedness and radical detachability". Although they have so far been analyzed mostly as constituents of larger story structures like plots, themes and storyworlds, the building of mental models allows cutting them loose from these structures, peeling them off the page, and transplanting them somewhere else entirely. The next subchapter will investigate what kind of theoretical considerations this type of independence from a single text and a single author demands.

### c.) Transtextual Rebellion

"Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself --. -- On you it rests, whether I quit for ever the neighborhood of man, and lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow-creatures, and the author of your own speedy ruin." (*F* 68–69.)

With his newly acquired ability to read, the Creature is able to decipher the lab notes he finds in the pocket of his stolen coat. Deeply disgusted by what he learns, he promptly confronts his creator, pleading Frankenstein – under the threat of destruction and "desolation of his heart" – to recognize that his Creature will henceforth dictate his own thoughts and needs: he is no longer a functional artefact but a more complex, processual being capable of appealing to Frankenstein's feelings, if not to complete equality with him. (*F* 90–91, 102.) *The Unwritten* (#23, [1]; #27–30)

does not parallel this plot point to the letter, as Tom only finds and studies his fathers' diaries after his death. He does seek to confront his dad before that (#15-16), however, and starts using his magical abilities to his own ends later in the series, after he has fulfilled his function by defeating his father's enemies.

Following Jeff Thoss (189-190, 198), the revenge on the creator seems to be as common a theme in metaleptical narratives as it is in stories about counterontological, self-aware creations (Zunshine 51-116). Indeed, the theme has figured in other Vertigo series, such as Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* (1988-1990) long before *The Unwritten*, complete with Biblical undertones. As Thoss (198) notes, these tales more often than not draw comparisons to Adam's and Lucifer's rebellions: if God created human into his own imperfect, rebellious image, what was human to do but to create character in his imperfect, rebellious image? In terms of literary theory, the cognitive dissonance caused by characters' "dual nature" (Schneider 607) - or the concurrence of their synthetic and mimetic aspects (Phelan) - is a cause for mental conflict. Situating the creator and the created metaleptically on the same ontological plane only allows this conflict to manifest socially as well.

Whenever this is not the case, however, characters require an accomplice that has the same ontological standing as their creators. In other words, it is the humanizing, cognitive process of reading that liberates the characters from the tyranny of the "Author-God", as Barthes declares in his seminal, unmistakably Frankensteinian essay, "The Death of the Author". Indeed, his (148) idea that "a text's unity lies -- in its destination" rather than in "its origin" closely resembles the stitching principles of cognitive theorists. Only Barthes is not at all wary of the multiple, elusive interpretations - a proliferation of unities - this entails. On the contrary, for him, the act of interpretation is what makes texts "truly revolutionary", "since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law" (Barthes 147) - transgressions to which Frankenstein and his Creature are both rather prone.

In the context of *The Unwritten* (#21, [12]), the Creature is also quick to disregard the author as "only one **man**", because the true power of Tom and, by analogy, all the fictional characters lies, first and foremost, in the Leviathan of readership (*TU* #23) and, secondarily, in the "grid" of intertexts (e.g. *TU* #14, [5]). As Barthes (146) declares, texts - and the characters they generate - are ultimately just "tissue[s] of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture". This robs the Author of his authoritative position as the texts' true origin. Like the reader, the author is only a way-station, a processor of texts, which extend far beyond him; all he ever does is reorder the fragments, "imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original".

Similarly, from this intertextual point of view, Frankenstein is not the unprecedented genius he purports to be but merely the "modern" reiteration of Prometheus, patching together recycled material "from other books from the past" (Holquist 88–89, 94). Victor Frankenstein has to die in the final act, because "[t]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 148) – and, at the same time, his Creation must live on, as his "tissues" will forever be reusable by ever-new Promethea.

When Tom first encounters the Creature, he tries to dismiss him as "just a character from a book, [a] really *old* book that nobody reads" (TU #7, [2]) but just as he utters these words he also admits recognizing the scarred hulk. This is because he is not only "a character from a book", but also the star of an entire "Frankenstein industry" (Vidal 92). Even if "nobody reads" the "original" book, the Creature is still familiar to us from the iconic Universal film series, from such contemporary retellings as *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) or *Victor Frankenstein* (2015), and even from Halloween decorations. As this article has established, the Creature has an ancestral intertextual relationship to Tom as well. During their second encounter – which takes place on Pequod, inside the storyspace of *Moby Dick* – the Creature overtly asserts that "the bond" between Tom and himself is "so strong" because he was "the first" (TU #21, [9]), and in the context of the scene, he is quite right: *The Unwritten* and *Moby Dick* (Baldick 75–84) can both be considered thematic heirs of *Frankenstein*. In a larger scheme of things, the Creature is not the first or last of anything, however: Baldick and other theorists have found dozens of other rebellious creations across European and North American literature both preceding and following him.

Wolfgang G. Müller has identified several types of these intertextual inter-character relationships, proclaimed them an important tool for characterization, and gathered them under the umbrella term of "interfigurality". The main claim of this theory is that if two characters in two different texts share names, functions or traits, they also invite further comparisons, for instance, on the levels of themes and character configurations. In other words, while the discovery of his intertextual ancestors, such as Milton's Lucifer, only makes the mimetic aspect of the Creature realize the depths of his loneliness, these very same characters connect his artificial and thematic aspects to a textual genealogy that is not under the control of his "original" authors, Frankenstein and Mary Shelley – or indeed, under the control of any one person at all. Like all the other "modern myths" from Faust, Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe to Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Baldick 2), the Creature has been repeated, recognized and repeated again so many times in so many contexts he has come to embody, all on his own, the entire symbolic weight of the textual structures to which he is supposedly enslaved.

Although Müller (103) implicitly pledges allegiance to the structuralist view of character when he defines characters as "bundle[s] of qualities (character traits)" identified by "onomastic label[s]", his theory also relies on recognition, comparison and recollection – in other words, the cognitive work of the reader. To match this, Schneider (620) infers that the cognitive processing of characters must also draw on readers' "literary knowledge", such as conceptions of genres and literary stock characters – and this type of knowledge must be based on intertextual or -figural observations. Thus, as Barthes' essay and Wilson Taylor's plan already hint, intertextuality and readers' cognitions are essentially the two sides of the same "radical detachment" coin, because characters' transtextual wanderings and genealogies must be based on both reading and repeating.

Indeed, when Hochman (59–61) declares characters "dead" and irrevocably beyond the readers' influence, he disregards the main lesson of *Frankenstein*: that the dead can always be resurrected – or rewritten. If even just chunks of past characters are repurposed these allusions can, following Müller's theory, prompt recollections – or cognitive resurrections – of entire texts and characters. However, these recollections can be accidentally or purposefully inaccurate, which grants the critics, illustrators, adaptors, borrowers, reinterpreters and actors of characters the power to invent new traits, unearth new nuances, and as a result, gain some influence over them – a power that fan fiction enthusiasts, for example, have readily embraced. Every new text, no matter how inaccurate it is in comparison to the "original", will generate new mental models in its readers, and the readers can use these mental models to transplant the mutated character into ever new texts. What results is the total loss of authorial control and armies of disfigured characters with potential for immortality.

Crucially, Schneider (610) underlines that the mental models that literary texts generate are also multimodal, because the text can attribute the character any abstract or concrete traits, detectable by any sensory or cognitive faculty – a notion that Caracciolo's emphasis on experientiality takes even further. This means that the cognitive view of character can also serve as the malleable basis of – or may even be a prerequisite for – inter- and transmedial characterization and transplantation.

Characters that wander across media borders are not a new phenomenon, of course: a good portion of visual art dating from antiquity depicts the same gods and heroes that were central subjects of the oral traditions of the era. Yet, digitalization has made multimodality so economic and ubiquitous that the pressure of transmedializing narrative theory is increasing by the day. With the author dead and the surrounding textual structures partially severed, theories based on character traits and copyright

laws (Richardson), or theories that reduce characters to embedded signposts of storyworlds (Wolf) are not sufficient for explaining how the many facets of character mesh with the many facets of these multimedia environments. Therefore, it seems probable that character theory will soon follow the triumphant, masterless Creature into unmapped territories.

## Conclusions

To conclude, organizing different character theories around the skeletal model of *Frankenstein*, as suggested by *The Unwritten*, seems to produce this polysemous distillation:

- a. Bits of text form a functional, yet human-like creature.
- b. Reading transforms this creature into (a mental model of) a seemingly sentient being.
- c. This being can escape its authorial framework, mutate and multiply.

On the one hand, these three points roughly reflect the evolution of literary character theories during the past century. On the other hand, these theories overlap in surprising ways, in spite of their chronology or theoretical starting points. Making use of such overlaps allows portraying our fictional cousins in an exceptionally holistic way: as dynamic constructions that constantly negotiate mimetic humanity and unavoidable artificiality as well as elusive, inferred lives and multimodal, repeatable bodies. This monster analogy should, therefore, not only be viewed as a forced and reductive comparative survey but, rather, as a demonstration of how hybridizing theories could help us to understand the hybrid nature of fictional characters. All in all, characters are most like Frankenstein's monster in that understanding them requires two conflicting cognitive strategies: they are read as persons and used as artefacts. Reconciling these aspects causes some cognitive dissonance, which may explain why formalistic and humanizing views of character have been quite difficult to seam together. However, this counterontological dissonance seems to be at the heart of characters and allows them to function in unique ways, as flexible, potentially transmedial and immortal beings.

Of course, like Frankenstein, I am more than ready to admit that my construction is less than perfect. As "the second creation" is attributed to the reader, rather than to the Creature/character itself, as in Holquist's original proposal, both the reader and the author are alternately cast in the role of Frankenstein, and subordinating characters to a multitude of animators, instead of a single genius, differentiates them from the Creature in a decisive way: it enables them to change and procreate. Fictional

characters can thus build themselves as many funeral pyres as they like but someone can always continue their story, even if – and especially when – the author is dead.

Finally, the fact that the analogy was initiated by *The Unwritten's* multimodal, metafictional treatment of the Creature directs the attention to comics and what insights they could provide into the puzzles of character. Unfortunately, the self-awareness of the series only reaches its fictionality, never its mediality: Tom never learns that he is not only a fictional character but also a comic book character, which means that the series scarcely experiments with medium-specific characterization devices. On a more abstract level, however, the mismatched collage quality of graphic storytelling, and the overt gaps that riddle each comic book page, do embody Frankensteinian aesthetics. If the Creature is “a genius of liminality”, comics are the art of liminality, ideally situated between the various visual media, and the literary print media, on which the bulk of current narrative theory is based. Comics could thereby constitute an excellent laboratory for testing and improving character theories', and other narrative theories', transmedial applicability (cf. Kukkonen).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because the collected paperback editions of *The Unwritten* lack page numbers, references are made to individual issues, whose pages have been counted manually, starting from the first page that continues the story (i.e. blank pages, and pages with bonus materials are excluded from the count). The source listing specifies which issues are included in which albums. Issues beyond #35.5 are not discussed in this article simply because the Creature barely figures in the later story arcs. To make the references more concise, abbreviations are used to for the primary texts, Carey et al.'s *The Unwritten (TU)* and Shelley's "The Text of *Frankenstein* (1818)" (*F*).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zunshine's (51–131) discussion of “the Frankenstein complex”.

<sup>3</sup>The slashes amidst the quotations mark progression from one speech bubble to another.

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