CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as an introduction to the paper. It provides an overview of the research, detailed information regarding the research background, the statement of problems, the research purposes, and the significance of the research.

1.1. Research Background

With the booming success of the superhero genre in films, especially the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) line of films in recent years, audience are becoming increasingly interested in the source material that it's adapted from, which is comics. Once regarded as one of the lower forms of mass entertainment, comic books are today widely considered to be capable of complex and profound expression as both literary and visual art forms, stated by Dziedzic & Peacock (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 1). Historically, comic books as a medium starts out as a form of sequential arts, dating back between 10,000 and 25,000 years ago to convey simple narratives found in Egyptian tomb paintings, Bayeux Tapestry, Mexican codices, and various cave paintings, far from today's interpretation of sequential arts that we have come to call comics. (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 21). It is concluded then, that in these modern times, comic can be considered to be a form of literature that is both dynamic in nature and form, also encompassing a wide array of topics, both serious or light in its tone.

In Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud (1993, p. 9) the definition of comics is juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. Keeping the definition in mind, the example of the aforementioned paragraph could still be classified as the early iteration of comics. For the purpose of this research, it is also important to note that the modern form of comic which is a sequential art forms employed as popular entertainment media is revolutionized

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by the technology of the printing press. (Duncan & Smith, 2009, p. 22) And later by the use of the digital space.

Taking the Marvel Cinematic Universe line of films and the comics they are based from as previously exemplified, the audience can see the element of characterization through various methods, of which described by Pickering & Hoeper (1981, Chapter I) are as follows: characterization through the use of names such as Captain America that symbolizes the ideal *American Dream* through his name, characterization through appearance can be seen on characters like the Hulk that gives the readers the sense of immense strength through his gigantic and greenish appearance alone, characterization by the author through his voice within or outside the narrative such as when Stan Lee, the creator of Spider-Man, describes Spider-Man in an interview as someone that the audience can relate to (Matter, 2018), characterization through dialogue such as mantra or catchphrases, one of the most famous being Spider-Man's "*With great power, there must also come great responsibility.*" (Owsley, 1986), and finally characterization through action that could be seen within countless superhero characters and their selfless heroic deeds.

This also relates to the concept of counterpart, which is defined as something remarkably similar to another; or something having the same function or characteristics as another (Merriam-Webster, 2025a). Being that there is a character called Spider-Man in the films and Spider-Man in the comics, does not necessarily mean that they are the exact same characters. There are numerous similarities between the characters, but calling them different *version* or portrayal because of the deliberate decisions made by the author (Shashidhar, n.d.) regarding the characters seems more fitting for the purpose of this research.

On the topic of portrayal, which is defined as the act or process or an instance of portraying (Merriam-Webster, 2025c). While the term depiction is defined as a representation in words or images of someone or something (Merriam-Webster, 2025b). Both terms are used in this research interchangeably, depending on the context, to explain the topics in relation to characters and how they are characterized, for example the portrayal between the aforementioned characters in

MCU and their comic book counterpart differs from one source to another and thus impacting their element of characterization, though their similarities are numerous, such as the characterization through their names, appearance, dialogue, actions, etc.

Moving on from comics, the research would then delve to another form of literature, namely folktale, which is a part of folklore, an important branch of learning which is only in part occupied with aesthetic facts, since it studies the total civilization of a "folk," its costumes and customs, superstitions and tools as well as its arts. (Wellek & Warren, 1956, pp. 38–39) Furthermore, it can also be concluded that folktale can be defined as a traditional narrative or story that has been passed down through generations within a community. Folktale stories often reflect the cultural beliefs, values, and traditions of the group from which they originate. These stories are typically transmitted orally and may be accompanied by specific cultural practices or rituals.

And so, to quote Matthew Arnold, "Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures." (Bassnett, 1993, p. 1) The importance of this excerpt is to serve as a reminder of the importance of comparative literature contained intertextually, especially in relation to literary works, which as defined by Wellek & Warren "confines it to the study of relationships between two or more literatures" (1956, p. 39). It also coincides with the simple explanation provided by Susan Bassnett, which is that comparative literature entails the study of pieces of literature across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures spanning both time and space. (Bassnett, 1993, p. 1)

And thus, coming from the topics explained above, this research would interrogate the element of characterization in the pages of comic, Bill Willingham's *Fables*, and how it compares to the classical folktales. As a student of English Literature in UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, the researcher has always been fascinated by the topic of folklore in general and folktale specifically, especially after learning the subject of Comparative Literature in class, and according to Max Koch, folklore

has become a discipline in its own right, but the comparative study of folksong and poetry is seen as fundamental to comparative literature (Bassnett, 1993, p. 25). Upon which the researcher observed that in comparative literature studies, finds that the element of characterization to be an interesting topic to explore, considering its importance to the narrative of a story, and how those characters embody or oppose the values and beliefs that is held in their respective culture. As Pickering & Hoeper said in their book Concise Companion to Literature (1981, p. 23), is that the fascination with fictional characters comes from our strong connection to them, often surpassing our understanding of real people. In real life, we judge individuals based on their actions and words, while their inner complexities remain hidden, requiring prolonged interaction to unveil. In contrast, fiction offers immediate insight into characters' inner worlds, including their intellect, emotions, and morals. Even when authors do not reveal everything, they provide clues for us to form judgments about the characters. In both cases, our ability to interpret these clues is crucial for understanding the story. But in traditional folktale storytelling, as Lüthi said (1986, pp. 12 & 15), folktale characters and animals, similarly, lack physical and psychological depth. Folktales simplify the vast complexities of human beings. Instead of many conceivable styles of behavior being blended in a single person, we see them distinctly separated and split among persons standing side by side. And such, a novelty is found within Bill Willingham's *Fables*, which bridges the gap between comic and folktale through the lenses of comparative literature.

The research would then introduce *Fables*, an American comic book series conceived and written by Bill Willingham and published under DC Comics' Vertigo label. Fables was launched in July 2002 and finished in July 2015. The series features diverse characters from fairy tales and folktales – referring to themselves as "Fables" – who founded a hidden community decades ago within New York City known as Fabletown, after their Homelands were destroyed by a mysterious and terrible enemy known as "The Adversary". It takes place in contemporary times and follows several of Fabletown's legal representatives, such as sheriff Bigby Wolf, deputy mayor Snow White, her sister Rose Red, Prince Charming, and Boy Blue, as they deal with troublesome Fables and try to solve conflicts in both Fabletown

and "the Farm", a hidden town in upstate New York for Fables unable to blend in with human society. The comic also deals with such other subjects as the main protagonists' personal lives, their attempts to disguise the Fables' real nature from ordinary people (or "Mundies", which refers to their mundane nature), and eventually, the reappearance of the Adversary.

The various folktale that is featured as a character in *Fables* is predominantly of Germanic and English in their origin inspired by tales compiled by the world-renowned academics Wilhelm Grimm and Jacob Grimm, collectively known as Brothers Grimm. Though there are characters of folktales of various other origin, namely French and Arabic. This research focuses mainly on the work of Brothers Grimm titled *Kinder-und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales)*, which has been translated and edited by Jack Zipes who has "endeavored to capture the tone and style of the different tales by translating them into a basic contemporary American idiom" (J. Grimm & Grimm, 2014, p. xlv) and done so to reproduce the brusque manner of the narratives. Surely, with the popularization of classical folktales by Disney, we already been introduced to the characters of "Cinderella" ("*Aschenputtel*"), "The Frog Prince" ("*Der Froschkönig*"), "Hansel and Gretel" ("*Hänsel und Gretel*"), "Little Red Riding Hood" ("*Rotkäppchen*"), "Rapunzel", "Sleeping Beauty" ("*Dornröschen*"), and "Snow White" ("*Schneewittchen*"), all of whom are featured in the *Fables* comic and retain some of their qualities, albeit with creative changes and interpretation.

Also, there have been several previous studies found to be a point of reference in this topic, firstly regarding a study by Jason Marc Harris titled *We All Live in Fabletown: Bill Willingham's Fables—A Fairy-Tale Epic for the 21st Century* (2016), in which he examines Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic book series and its spin-offs, focusing on its 14-year run and their importance in underlining the cultural significance, adaptability, subversiveness, and ubiquity of fairy-tale characters. Willingham's style entails combining aspects from many sources, such as the Brothers Grimm, Disney aesthetics, and more explicit, violent, and terrifying versions, to create a unique take on these characters. This technique is described as

synthetic, idiosyncratic, and libertarian, with a tension driving the storytelling in the Fables universe between his libertarian narrative and traditional folklore components. Characters such as Bigby, Snow White, Rose Red, and Jack are portrayed in ways that question contemporary standards about gender, heroism, narrative genres, and the concept of a fairy tale. Finally, the plot mixes tradition with innovation to create fairy-tale characters who defy the restrictions of traditional folklore, mythology, and metafiction, providing a unique and multidimensional storytelling experience.

The second is research conducted by Barbara Grüning of Germany titled *Educating to Remember: The Public Use of Comics in Germany and Italy* (2021, pp. 95–108) and uses the method of comparative literature to examine four case studies of distinct public uses of comics to reflect unpleasant pasts: the National Socialist and GDR pasts in Germany, and the Fascist past and terrorist/Mafia massacres in Italy. The comparative research focuses on three influential factors: narratives and artistic forms culturally legitimized in the two national public memory spaces, cultural frames that identify a specific history, and transnational comics cultural paradigms. In the end, the article considers not only graphic representations of the past, but also the social actors (artists, publishers, political institutions, public intellectuals) involved in this collectively working memory process, as well as their symbolic and cultural resources and power relationships.

1.2. Statement of Problems

Based on the backgrounds above and previous studies, this research is conducted based on the fact that there are research gaps in the field of comparative study that specifically analyze the comparative aspects of characterization of two interconnected works of Bill Willingham's *Fables* and Brother Grimm's collected folktales. This research concludes that the following two questions are the primary focus of this study:

1. How are the characterizations portrayed in Bill Willingham's comic series *Fables* compared to its counterpart in various folktale's characters, especially those collected by Brother Grimm?

2. How does the element of characterization depicted in Bill Willingham's comic series *Fables* and various folktale's character, especially those collected by Brother Grimm?

1.3. Research Purposes

Based on the formulation of the research problems above, the purposes of this research are as follows:

1. To explain the characterization between the characters in Bill Willingham's *Fables* and various folktale characters.
2. To explain the depiction in the element of characterization in Bill Willingham's *Fables* and various folktale characters.

1.4. Research Significance

The expectation of this research is that the findings and results has benefits in providing insights into literary studies. This research is aimed to be of significance in the enrichment of knowledge and theoretical perspective in comparative literature study, especially on the element of characterization. It is also in the hope of this research that it becomes an empirical source for future researchers and readers of which the element of characterization and comparative literature becomes a subject of interest.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

In this study, key terms are defined to ensure clarity and precision in their usage. This helps to eliminate potential misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and ambiguities, allowing readers to engage with the content without confusion. By providing clear definitions, the study aims to establish a common understanding of the terminology, ensuring consistency and accuracy in the analysis and discussion.

1. Comic

   A juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. (McCloud, 1993, p. 9)
2. Folktale:

Folktale is a characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people. (Merriam-Webster, 2024)

3. Portrayal/Depiction

Portrayal is the act or process or an instance of portraying (Merriam-Webster, 2025c). Depiction is a representation in words or images of someone or something (Merriam-Webster, 2025b). Both of which are terms used in this study *interchangeably*, depending on the context, to explain the topics in relation to characters and how they are characterized.

4. Counterpart

Counterpart is defined as something remarkably similar to another; or something having the same function or characteristics as another (Merriam-Webster, 2025a). This term is used in this research often when comparing characters that shares numerous similarities.

5. Element of Characterization

The element of characterization are the way characters are presented and established. Consisting of five different methods, these are: characterization through the use of names, characterization through appearance, characterization by the author, characterization through dialogue, and characterization through action. (Pickering & Hoeper, 1981, Chapter I)