Perpetual Story Machines: Swamp Thing, Fantastic Transformation, and Narrative Exhaustion
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§1. Introduction

On J586, a planet peopled by sentient vegetation, seven blobs of color, stacked high like scoops of ice cream, float in a test tube-like container. The super-powered guardian of J586 sits opposite the hovering cyan and magenta patches and tentatively addresses something that looks more like a traffic light than an organism. The guardian slowly asks these blobs about who and what they are. Remarkably, the blobs explain that they have been exiled from their homeworld and express their deep regret for the chaos they have just wrought on J586.

A towering wooden figure lumbers through the skyscraper-lined streets of a city. Its massive oaken toes dwarf the cars it tramples with indifference. Its mouth gapes open in some kind of constant bellow. Several pages earlier, it promised to raze the city if its object of human affection was not released. Like a wood-carved skeleton of a Lovecraftian elder god, it makes King Kong or Godzilla seem ordinary in comparison.

These creatures and the stories in which they occur are obviously fantastic. They are each, upon the briefest inspection, incredible, monstrous beings at odds with what we understand about our actual world. The first creature, appearing in a science fiction story, is described as a "web of knotted light strung on empty air." As a creature appearing within a comic book, it fits uncomfortably with the medium itself, since the tails of its speech balloons point blindly and awkwardly into undifferentiated patterns of saturated color. The second creature occupies the better part of a splash page, punctuating a story that interweaves elements of horror and superhero comics and signals the narrative moment at which nature somehow seeks vengeance upon urban living.

These creatures are unabashedly strange, but what's perhaps most striking about them is that they are, in fact, one and the same. Subject to a series of progressively more radical transformations, this single character is transported across settings, into enormously different forms, and through a variety of different genres. The remarkable extent of this character's transformation is made stranger still by the fact that it is named 'Swamp Thing' and that there's nary a swamp in sight through these stories. Where preceding Swamp Thing stories are largely unified by their setting in a swamp, these moments from Alan Moore's run on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* are united, first and foremost, by virtue of being episodes in the radical and pervasive transformation of the titular character.

Fantastic transformations are nothing new to comics. Humans turn into monsters. Animals turn into humans. Heroes are transformed into stone, glass, or beams of light. Indeed, the first transformation of Swamp Thing from man into sentient vegetable in *House of Secrets* #92 (1971) and revisited in *Swamp Thing* #1 (1972) are far from the only time a human has met such a fate in comics.[1] But the fact that fantastic transformations are familiar does not mean that they are well understood.[2] And, reflection upon fantastic transformation, especially as Moore deploys it in *Saga of the Swamp Thing,* sheds useful light on a foundational question about characters and the

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[1] *Comics Creator 6: Swampmen* is a wide-ranging overview of "swamp creatures" in comics
[2] On fantastic transformation, especially as it concerns racial categories, see Cowling (2020).

stories we tell with them—in particular, whether characters like Swamp Thing are exhaustible resources for storytelling or instead perpetual story machines, always yielding rich and novel storytelling possibilities.

§2. The Exhaustibility Thesis
A few issues prior to the beginning of Moore's run, we find a dim appraisal of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #16 served up by Robert Fiore in *The Comics Journal* #84 (p. 43):

> Not bad, in a mediocre sort of way. Certainly as good as you could hope for with a title like "Stopover in a Place of Secret Truths." It comes off like a mid-range *Twilight Zone* episode; the trick ending is obvious, but it's fairly diverting. The trouble is that Berni Wrightson and Len Wein said all this character has to say so effectively that anything that might be done by lesser talents is superfluous. The artists, Steve Bissette and John Totleben, give indications that they, at least, deserve better.

Whether or not one agrees with this assessment of the Marty Pasko-helmed issue, there's an eyebrow-raising claim about Swamp Thing made in passing: that, after Wrightson and Wein ended their work on the original *Swamp Thing* series, that "all [Swamp Thing] has to say" was, in fact, said.[3] Of course, this isn't really a matter of what Swamp Thing *says*, but what can be said about him in the process of telling Swamp Thing stories. And, as Moore's run makes obvious, Fiore was simply mistaken. The critical approbation that Moore's run has received is convincing evidence that Swamp Thing was not—at least by the time Moore got to him—a narrative sponge that had all of its stories wrung out of it.

While we might find fault with Fiore's specific assessment of Swamp Thing, the general idea about comics and stories is a familiar one—that the narrative potential of a character can be exhausted in much the same way a knife might dull or a lawnmower might run out of gas. We often hear such claims just as a writer elects to kill off or remove a character from a series. Any such claims presuppose, however, the truth of a more general one, which we can call the *exhaustibility thesis*, that asserts a relationship between two of the basic categories of fiction—characters and stories. It holds that each thing in the former category has something like a narrative shelf-life or expiration date after which it yields diminishing narrative returns. And, if Fiore is correct, some of these shelf-lives can be surprisingly short, since Wein and Wrightson needed only ten issues of the original *Swamp Thing* series to do all that is worth doing with Swamp Thing.

At first glance, the history of comics suggests that the exhaustibility thesis has to be false. After all, Batman stories continue to multiply like rabbits, *Golgo 13* tankobon continue their incessant production, and Garfield strips just keep coming. But, upon closer scrutiny, this only shows that the *plausible* versions of the exhaustibility thesis must be fairly subtle and require

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[3] The original *Swamp Thing* series ran for 24 issues with Wein and Wrightson collaborating on the first ten issues and Wein continuing on for three additional issues. Notably, Wein served as editor for the second series prior to Karen Berger taking over.

careful formulation. Implausibly strong versions of the exhaustibility thesis might, for example, hold that, eventually, you simply can't tell *any* story at all with a certain character. But obviously that can't be correct: we can always craft *some* story with any given character and these stories might be novel in some limited ways (e.g., with progressively wilder or random happenings). For this reason, plausible versions of the exhaustibility thesis aren't about whether we can produce stories, but instead about whether we can produce stories that meet certain aims. Put differently, the exhaustibility thesis that Fiore presupposes in his remarks is concerned with literary merit rather than logical possibility.

Even with this clarification, we might still be tempted to conclude that counterexamples abound throughout comics history. For example, by familiar critical standards in comics, there are recent stories about Superman, Batman, and other characters that enjoy comparable or even greater merit than those produced immediately after the creation of those characters.[4] And, while this puts pressure on the exhaustibility thesis, it ultimately suggest that a distinction in the kinds of artistic merit relevant to the exhaustibility thesis is necessary.

Defenders of the exhaustibility thesis can agree that various new issues of *Detective Comics* are good comics, but this might not be because of their *literary merits*. The defender of the exhaustibility thesis can argue that these comics succeed at some kind of non-literary humor in the case of comics strips like *Peanuts* or because of an admirable crafty riffing on established formula in the case of a new Batman comic. Moreover, in the latter case, the stories these comics tell are not prized for their literary value—e.g., their depth, thematic complexity, insightfulness into our lived experience, and so on—but for a non-literary kind of artistic merit.[5] We might, for example, take these Batman stories to be what Noel Carroll calls "junk fiction."[6] Such stories and the comics that tell them might warrant praise and foster enjoyment even if the stories are without significant literary value. More obviously, a *Peanuts* strip might simply be funny even if the highly abbreviated story it tells is without the kinds of values found in stories that enjoy literary esteem. So understood, the fact there are new and good *Batman* comics or *Peanuts* strips is perfectly compatible with the exhaustibility thesis so long as the value found in these comics is distinguished from the kind of literary value with which the exhaustibility thesis is actually concerned.

Note, however, that even with this clarification, we are left with open questions about whether the exhaustibility thesis asserts that the production of novel stories with significant literary merits is all but impossible, substantially unlikely, prohibitively difficult, or what have you. A full defense of the exhaustibility thesis would require taking sides on this point as well, but we can leave this particular complication open for present purposes.

But what if we look closer to where we find Swamp Thing stories in the comics medium? Consider the case of Grant Morrison's *All-Star Superman* (2005), which would seem to enjoy whatever literary merits a Superman story could aspire to but that appeared 66 years after the first Superman story. Defenders of the exhaustibility thesis could, of course, deny it enjoys any literary merits, but, given how the series compares to other superhero comics, this is implausible

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[4] On the nature of fictional characters and their relation to stories, see Thomasson (1999).

[5] On philosophical accounts of literary value, see Lamarque and Olsen (1997)

[6] On junk fiction, see Carroll (1994) and Roberts (1990).

unless one is willing to deny that *any* superhero comics enjoy literary merit.[7] But, along with being implausibly dismissive about the prospects for literary value in superhero comics, it looks like the exhaustibility thesis is of particular significance for the superhero genre. For, as Cray (2021) argues, we seem to rely on judgments about the relationship between characters and stories to understand the critical practices that surround superhero comics. For instance, when someone undertakes the project of creating a superhero comic, the creation of characters is a focal concern and the assessment of new characters is closely bound up with what they might offer in terms of narrative possibilities. Most obviously, formulaic or parasitic characters that offer no novel narrative possibilities are roundly derided, since, along with signaling a lack of creativity, they afford creators no new storytelling opportunities.

A different way the defender of the exhaustibility thesis might address the challenge posed by *All-Star Superman* and similar comics is to simply insist that some characters like Superman are imbued with especially profound narrative potential. This response contends that, while the vast majority of long-forgotten characters are of only trifling narrative potential, Superman is as close to a perpetual story machine as any character could be, providing unlimited (or nearly limitless) storytelling possibilities of novel literary value.

Now, although this is a consistent response, it raises a key challenge for anyone tempted by the exhaustibility thesis in the first place: how exactly do we determine the narrative potential of a given character? Moreover, in the case of Fiore's assessment of *Swamp Thing* #16, why would Fiore—or anyone else, for that matter—think that Swamp Thing was out of storytelling gas?

A natural explanation of Fiore's assessment—apart, of course, from the simple fact that Pasko's Swamp Thing stories were of limited interest—issues from the narrative dynamics of Swamp Thing itself: that the endemic setting of the character (the swamp), the powers of the character (principally, physical ones), and the prevailing aim of the character (returning to human form) leave writers of *Swamp Thing* with rather little to work with. There are, for example, only so many times that Swamp Thing might recognize the humanity in other misunderstood monsters or have a brush with returning to human form without the results degrading into Carroll-style "junk" that lacks credible claim to literary value.

A further consideration in support of Fiore's claim to Swamp Thing's narrative exhaustion is the character's relation to the two genres it straddles: horror comics and superhero comics. Consider, for example, the narrative tendency within the superhero genre to return characters to a uniform and largely unchanging status quo upon defeating villains and overcoming adversity. For example, despite the countless threats visited upon it, Metropolis still stands and, no less remarkably, the Daily Planet continues to cover its daily news.[8] Similarly, no matter how many threats she's faced, Lois Lane remains (or invariably returns) as part of Superman stories. The preservation of the status quo within superhero comics is, in part, why the exhaustibility thesis plays a significant and distinctive role in our character-directed aesthetic judgments that drive it: the superhero genre presupposes that we are to hold a character's setting, powers, and supporting cast largely fixed. For just this reason, narrative possibilities will mostly be a function

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[7] On one dimension of the literary merits of Moore's *Swamp Thing,* see Whitted (2012) for a careful examination of the engagement of the series with "postmodern slave narrative" and the ecology of the American South.

[8] On superheroes and their peculiar relation to the status quo, see Eco (1972).

of what can be extracted from the character itself and that character's initial conditions (e.g., setting, powers, supporting cast).

The narrative disposition of superhero comics to uphold the status quo is noteworthy in its own right, but is especially striking once contrasted with the narrative dynamics of the other genre associated with Swamp Thing. In horror comics, the inducement of fear in the audience is a central concern and the task of producing it is made vastly easier through the inclusion of unpredictable and irrevocable events in stories—most notably, in the killing of focal characters.[9] Notice that in paradigmatic horror comics, like EC Comics' *Tales from the Crypt* or Warren's *Creepy* or *Eerie,* typical stories treat the cast of characters as entirely dispensable and very unlikely to make it through eight full pages. To the extent that characters are developed or afforded personalities in these horror stories, it is only to contrive ironic and brutal fates for them. Houses, towns, and planets are regularly annihilated with no hint of a return. Protagonists, no matter how tough, regularly find themselves shrieking and recoiling in fright as their status quo vanishes forever.

Any comic that seeks to synthesize the superhero and horror genres faces a significant hurdle. The affect which horror comics aim to produce requires the possibility of characters and even planets being swiftly dispatched, but superhero comics rarely admit the demise of their focal characters or entirely undo the status quo. For this reason, there is a genuine friction between the two genres despite their affinity for including remarkable and monstrous beings. So, in keeping with tendencies of Wein and Wrightson's stories, if we take Swamp Thing to be a character deployed at the intersection of these genres, there is reason to believe that narrative exhaustion is an especially live possibility. Like a pedestrian stuck on an island surrounded by traffic heading in opposite directions, the countervailing constraints of these genres leave little room to cross. And, even for those unsympathetic to the exhaustibility thesis, these features make clear that, in taking the helm of *Saga of the Swamp Thing,* Moore faced a distinctive challenge. Telling new and rich Swamp Thing stories while also retaining the setting, status quo, and genre-based mandates of the character is, for these reasons, a difficult enterprise.

§3. Fantastic Transformation
Like *Watchmen*, *From Hell*, or *Lost Girls*, Moore's run on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* was initially published in serial format. But, where those works were ultimately conceived of and best dissected as thematically unified projects, Moore's *Swamp Thing* run is more aptly understood along the lines of a conventional serialized comics series.[10] It is, at bottom, a bunch of stories stitched together with a few different throughlines, and, as the history of its production bears out, uncertainty about how long it might run for and on-going battles with a schedule.[11] There is no *ur*-narrative to the series, and, if there is to be a synoptic understanding of it, it can only be achieved by thinking of the various strategies Moore puts to work in producing the twenty or so stories spread over forty or so issues. Some of these strategies are highly general—e.g., Moore's

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[9] On the nature and limits of the horror genre, see Carroll (1990).

[10] In support of this contention, note that in Wolk (2007), the former comics receive sustained analysis, while Moore's run on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is largely noted for its Moorean miscellany.

[11] Bissette (2020) offers a careful accounting of the production process behind *Saga of the Swamp Thing* in the "Absolute Edition" of *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, which notably replaces the work of colorist Tatjana Wood.

willingness to reposition Swamp Thing with regard to genre and to slough off the recipe that pitted Swamp Thing as a monstrous hero against a retinue of classic monster tropes.[12] Another recurring strategy, especially when Moore aims at the horror genre, is simply to place Swamp Thing in the narrative periphery.[13] Straightforward horror comics like "The Curse"(#40) and "Southern Change" and "Strange Fruit" (#41-42) are obviously horror stories that include Swamp Thing, but are, in many respects, only incidentally Swamp Thing stories.

There is, however, a more powerful and noteworthy strategy, which is set into place at the outset of Moore's run, predicated upon the revelation that, contrary to preceding canon, Swamp Thing isn't a transmogrified Alec Holland. Rather than being a human-turned-monster, Swamp Thing is a *sui generis* monster imbued with the now-dead Holland's memories. As retcons go, this is a deceptively subtle one: no previous events are set aside as imaginary, no boundaries in the multiverse are shattered.[14] In fact, this revelation leaves *almost* all of the preceding Swamp Thing continuity intact. It's still true that Alec Holland was exploded in a swamp. It's still true that a hulking, sentient vegetable emerged. That creature still called itself 'Alec Holland' and (we can assume) the stories unfurled in preceding issues of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* aptly depict what takes place in continuity. The only difference is about identity—about which thing is which. And, if Swamp Thing isn't a former human, the prior impetus and overarching concern of the original series—to return his humanity—can be abandoned. This is because the narrative concern of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* is no longer how to *return* Swamp Thing to what he once was, but rather to determine what kind of thing he is and what things are possible for that type of creature.

Exploiting the transformational limits of Swamp Thing is Moore's primary strategy for meeting the threat of narrative exhaustion posed by the character and its history. It is, at the same time, the closest thing to a unifying thread through Moore's run. From the outset, Moore gradually strips away the presumed origin, previously understood psychology, *de facto* setting, typical appearance, and almost anything else we might take to be distinctive or essential to Swamp Thing. As a result, Moore takes a narrowly circumscribed character and converts it into a plastic story-telling tool that passes through the bizarre states described at the outset of this essay. The process of this transformation does not, of course, pass unnoticed in the comic. After transforming himself into what is effectively an entire mountain, Swamp Thing, speaking in what might as well be Moore's voice and reflecting on his newfound capacities, says "I'm almost frightened by the possibilities."(#37) Over subsequent issues, the trend towards ever-more radical transformation accelerates. As Swamp Thing is subject to a series of radical changes in virtue of increasingly god-like powers, the genre of *Saga of the Swamp Thing* swerves unpredictably into metaphysically-inflected fantasy threads that are unprecedented in the preceding Swamp Thing stories. Indeed, by the end of Moore's run, the series has veered into unalloyed science fiction,

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[12] These stories are surely not absent from Moore's run, however: the earlier arcs in Moore's run where Swamp Thing contends with the Fluoronic Man or becomes entangled with Etrigan are the truest to this formula.

[13] According to Bisette (2020), several more conventional horror stories were suggested and initially outlined by Totleben and Bissette—e.g., "The Nukeface Papers" (#35), "The Curse" (#40), and "The Monkey King" (#26-27). See Bissette's remarks in *The Comics Journal* #111 (1986) as well.

[14] On the nature of retcons, see Gavaler and Goldberg (2019).

cataloguing the travels of Swamp Thing through the cosmos as a being with only peripheral ties to earlier stories.

The extent of Swamp Thing's radical transformation is difficult to catalogue but also difficult to overstate. In physical terms, the character begins Moore's run tethered to a more or less fixed body. After developing the ability to regenerate himself and travel instantaneously through the Earth's system of vegetation, Swamp Thing's physical form vacillates in size and configuration. Then, at the conclusion of the "Garden of Earthly Delights" storyline, Swamp Thing is rendered "incompatible" with the Earth, leaving him a disembodied "bioelectric pattern." As he pings around the universe, in this and other forms—some constituted by entirely alien materials—there's no physical element of Swamp Thing left constant by the conclusion of Moore's run.

In psychological terms, the starkest revelation of Moore's run is that, despite having all the memories of Alec Holland, Swamp Thing is an altogether different being. No less remarkably, the psychedelic moments of Moore's run portray a mental life of Swamp Thing entirely unlike the one suggested in the early stories featuring the character.[15] His mind variously fuses with other beings, a sentient network of all the Earth's vegetation, and myriad creatures on an alien planet of sentient plants. Rather than a tragic, stifled monster on a futile quest to regain humanity, Moore's Swamp Thing is a distant, often meditative creature, regularly cast as having a consciousness that is somehow continuous with all non-animal life.

Where superheroes often find their minds or bodies altered via brainwashing and amnesia on the one hand and magical powers or cosmic rays on the other, there seems to be no feature of Swamp Thing untouched by Moore's transformative efforts. And, as Swamp Thing's physical and mental life are fantastically transformed, the narrative trajectory, genre, and setting of the book bear increasingly little similarity with Wein and Wrightson's initial *Swamp Thing* stories. This dissimilarity is striking enough that we might consider whether Moore's Swamp Thing is rightly viewed as a tale of fantastic transformation as I've argued, but instead as a kind of rebuttal of the importance of identity within comics.

There is, to be sure, some temptation toward a reading of Moore's *Swamp Thing* according to which the transformation of Swamp Thing into globs of light on an alien planet or into an kaiju-like being involves creating *new* characters rather than transforming a pre-existing one.[16] Just as we can scarcely imagine you surviving transformation into a wooden monolith, this reading insists that Moore embraces the disconnected nature of serial storytelling by creating and recreating Swamp Thing anew each story. So understood, this take on Moore's *Swamp Thing* insists there is simply no single character of Swamp Thing with whom we're interested.

This kind of ambivalence about identity receives a rebuke in "My Blue Heaven" (*Saga of the Swamp Thing* (#56), which, more than any other story of Moore's run, invites us to view Swamp Thing as a physically plastic being, untethered to a specific physical form. As Swamp Thing wanders a nearly barren (and entirely swamp-less) planet in a meditative solitude, he constructs a variety of duplicates of his typical bodily form, inspecting and interacting with them in a

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[15] On the nature of Swamp Thing's mental life and the philosophical issues it raises, see Gavaler and Goldberg (2019), which revisits Gavaler and Goldberg (2017).
[16] On characters and multiplicity, see Brown (2020), especially chapter two.

manner that suggests he has no definitive body. Harnessing the empty canvas of the planet, he builds a vast and meticulously detailed simulacrum of the town of Houma and its inhabitants. Initially, he contents himself with a doppelganger of his partner, Abby (albeit, like everything else on this planet, a *blue* Abby). The rising, dramatic refrain in the issue is, however, that something isn't satisfactory with this mere facsimile. Presented as Swamp Thing's frustration that Abby "is not entirely right," Swamp Thing eventually obliterates the recreations and launches himself back to Earth.

While we might take Swamp Thing's inability to be satisfied with duplicate Abby to be simply a matter of him doing a bad job capturing her likeness, in a series so concerned with identity, the more plausible implication is that identity is of foundational but elusive significance. Merely pretending something is Abby or Swamp Thing does not, despite all of our efforts, make it so. After all, it is the question of identity—in particular, the identity of Swamp Thing and Alec Holland—that marks the chief departure of Moore's early Swamp Thing stories from those that preceded them. In this way, Moore's *Swamp Thing* makes a case against ambivalence about identity. In doing so, it cautions against relativistic exclamations that there's simply no fact of the matter about which character *really* is Swamp Thing or that we should abandon the idea that the identity of characters matters in the first place.

Rather than reading Moore's *Swamp Thing* as featuring a litany of distinct Swamp Things and, in so doing, casting it as something closer to an anthology series rather than the saga it purports to be, we can better understand his run as largely underpinned by the fantastic transformation of a single character. In doing so, we can best appreciate the audacity of Moore's storytelling gambit, especially in a comic that regularly strays into the superhero genre. Faced with a character threatened by the narrative exhaustion Fiore identifies, Moore subjects Swamp Thing to an extensive and unprecedented transformation, and, having done so, crafts a host of inventive and often experimental stories.[17]

§4. Are Characters Perpetual Story Machines?
Taken as a case study, Moore's maneuvering with Swamp Thing is a remarkable moment in mainstream comics storytelling. At the same time, it also threatens to undermine any hope for the exhaustibility thesis. Since it is arguably the case that *all* fictional characters are subject to fantastic transformation, it might seem that, in virtue of fantastic transformation, any given character can be supplied with a new and limitless stock of novel storytelling potential. Put simply, you might think that a writer could simply use Moore's strategy to radically transform any character and thereby generate narrative possibilities whenever a character might seem exhausted.

This strategy is, in principle, a somewhat familiar one. In mainstream superhero comics, lagging sales are often swiftly followed by some re-working of a character. But, unlike with Moore's *Swamp Thing*, these are often quite limited in scope. That said, if the possibility of radical transformation is nevertheless in the background as an option, it does seem tooffer, at least in

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[17] As Bradshaw(2013) and Gray (2013) argue, an important thread of this experimentation is the intertextual engagement with Gothic literary traditions, especially, as Gray contends, in capturing the ecological themes and their horrific dimensions.

principle, an inexhaustible reservoir of narrative options. Should we therefore conclude that Moore's *Swamp Thing* is the case study that shows the exhaustibility thesis is false?

To see that this isn't so, consider what might happen if we replicated Moore's *Swamp Thing* strategy in a very different context. Suppose that, as the tv series *The Sopranos* approached its sixth season, creator David Chase decided the series had grown stale and that, in order to revitalize it, Tony Soprano would fall into a pit of chemicals and emerge as a moth-like super-being hellbent on stopping global warming. That's a counterfactual history of *The Sopranos* we should concede is possible, but it's also a narrative turn that is staggeringly unlikely to be met with critical approbation. It would, among other things, require repositioning the series as an incredibly slow-boiling work of something like magical realism. So construed, its preceding seasons are puzzling and dreary. Alternatively, when evaluated through the lens of its initial crime drama genre, the fantastically transformed season(s) will seem disappointing for their harebrained weirdness and inconstant tone.

Imagine an even bleaker counterfactual history according to which fantastic transformations of this sort infect all manner of "prestige television" with the cast of *The Wire* being assigned to a starship, *Deadwood* contending with a ranch of magical unicorns, and so on. Where the case of *The Sopranos* illustrates how fantastic transformation seems unavailable to certain characters that are robustly tied to genres or to stories marked by a certain degree of realism, the scenario in which fantastic transformation pervades all prestige television indicates that there is no perfectly general strategy for preserving the narrative potential of characters. This is because narratives of fantastic transformation can, like any other narrative, prove hackneyed and formulaic when deployed *ad nauseum*. So, even if the fantastic transformation strategy might thwart narrative exhaustion in some cases, its availability in a case like Moore's *Swamp Thing* provides no reason to think that all characters might avoid exhaustion through similar means. There is, for example, no reason to think that a Moore-inspired turn in writing stories about a fantastically transformed Man-Thing would be immune to credible accusations of being derivative, formulaic, and generally uninteresting. When overused, fantastic transformation is no more or less susceptible to lapsing into junk fiction than any other storytelling strategy.

Recall, also, that the exhaustibility thesis concerns the generation of novel stories with significant literary value. Rewriting a work like *Hamlet* but with John Constantine acting just as Hamlet does would, for instance, be a literary achievement in only the most limited, *avant garde* sense. For roughly similar reasons, fantastic transformation is not—at least not on its own—a guarantor against narrative exhaustion even in the case of characters like Swamp Thing that have already been subject to the kind of successful fantastic transformation Moore accomplishes. Subsequent *Swamp Thing* series have, by and large, returned the character to the swamp and the character's early roots. This is partly because parachuting the character into predicaments like those Moore contrived for him would yield stories that lack the novelty of Moore's run as well as the readerly surprise and uncertainty about the character's interaction with these new contexts. So, even if Moore's use of fantastic transformation warded off narrative exhaustion in the case of Swamp Thing, fantastic transformation is not, on its own, a device that ensures each character is a perpetual story machine any more than, say, ever-changing superpowers are.

Defenders of the exhaustibility thesis can now point to the fact that, even in the face of radical transformation, the pasts of characters (even those that are rebooted or retconned) inform

the production and critical assessment of the stories in which they appear. And, since even fantastic transformation can seem formulaic or derivative when errantly employed or overused, the exhaustibility thesis is not undercut by what Moore accomplishes in his run on Swamp Thing. At the same time, fantastic transformation is essential to understanding the achievement of Moore's *Swamp Thing*, given the adeptness with which it destabilized a preceding mythos about Swamp Thing and catapulted the character into novel narrative contexts. The resulting stories naturally invite the reader to think such a character might indeed be inexhaustible if any character is. But, as the counterfactual cases above suggest, this isn't a generic strategy available to all characters threatened with exhaustion. The case against the exhaustibility thesis therefore remains open.

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