Swamp Thing case study as a fictional character design in popular culture for environmental conservation efforts

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Abstract The green spirit and movement are global issues that voice about environmental conservation efforts. Using media from popular culture as an approach, comics are used as product icons to convey messages regarding an issue. Comic consumers are mostly the younger generation. In comic, characters are designed to represent certain messages. This research used case study method on Swamp Thing comics with a semiotic approach. The data, especially the character design, were analyzed using denotative, connotative, and intertextuality analysis. The result of this research an identification of the use of a scary superhero character as an approach to deliver messages of environmental conservation. The parameters of the effectiveness of character design are seen from the sustainability and development of media that uses the character in their contents.

1. Introduction
The United Nations proposes 17 points of sustainable development goals (SDGs). The SDGs contain integrated strategies to promote sustainable practices and solutions that address the main problems faced by the society [1]. In the field of environmental conservation, SDG addresses issues regarding the use of and interaction with local resources (biodiversity, soil and water) and air pollutant emissions (toxic substances or greenhouse gas emissions) [2]. Climate change and industrial development are having a significant effect on Arctic land cover. The increase in atmospheric temperature over the past 30 years has driven land cover changes in the sensitive Arctic environment and exacerbated changes in large urban industrial centers in many places [3]. Since the 1990s, increasing concerns regarding global climate change, loss of biodiversity, degradation of ecosystems, and the sustainability of the human-dominated biosphere have driven the growth of ecosystem science, which is expected to provide systematic solutions to many of the major problems in the society [4].

Human attitudes and behaviors have been linked to the degradation of global biodiversity, particularly forest ecosystems. Effective conservation action requires committed individual and community attitudes and behaviors, as well as human value orientations [5]. Collectively, environmental activists identify resistance and opposition to the unequal socio-environmental dynamics brought about by resource extraction, despite the fact that resource extraction is not always opposed in every region. Mineral extraction and its consequences are not gone, nor are inevitable social and environmental changes [6]. The mass media can reflect public opinion on major environmental issues, but at the same time, it tends to influence the selection of public opinion and the framing of issues that are worth conveying [7].
The problem of nature and environmental conservation is a serious matter, thus cooperative participation from various elements of the society is needed. However, not all people can easily understand the gravity of this issue. Therefore, the use of media and various approaches is required. Comics provide an opportunity to communicate scientific information to people with low literacy [8]. Comics can be quickly and easily understood. Due to the fact that science education through comic media has become a new trend for children and adolescents, it has the potential to open new avenues for community and science engagement [9].

One of the comics published by DC Comics is Swamp Thing, written by Len Wein and illustrated by Bernie Wrightson. The Swamp Thing comic first appeared in the 92nd edition of the comic House of Secrets in 1971 (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This comic has a background of environmental conservation that can be seen from its main character, namely an idealist expert named Alec Holland. Alec turns into a monster figure due to a laboratory explosion that caused his body to merge with swamp vegetation. Swamp Thing protects people and its environment from each other. It then becomes a living embodiment of the power and terror of natural environment.

Currently, there have already been many research on environmental conservation and new media. However, there are still few studies on how comics and fictional characters convey the messages about preservation. This study on fictional characters that contribute to environmental preservation is expected to provide insight and discourse on the use of new media, especially comics and fictional character designs.

2. Methods
This qualitative research applied case study method with semiotic approach regarding the design of the main character of the Swamp Thing comic. Case study method is an investigative strategy in which the researcher explores an event, activity, program, process, or person by combining various sources of evidence, which may include documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations [10]. The comic with Swamp Thing character is an artifact model that is used as a sample of various fictional characters who raise issues regarding the environment or natural habitats, such as Poison Ivy, Groot, and many others.

The visual semiotic analysis was conducted by examining the denotative and connotative meaning of the Swamp Thing character design to determine the message represented in the character design. The connotative semiotic was used to define the second meaning, or the meaning behind the expressive (denotative) exposure to reveal the implicit ideological messages [11]. Intertextuality analysis was also carried out to examine the messages conveyed in the comic content and to see the relationship between comic character designs and other media. The intertextuality analysis examines a phenomenon as a text in which there are intertwined inserts of other texts [12].
3. Discussion

3.1. Visual image and message

Images are categorized into two general categories such as pictorial images (natural, mimetic), which represent or record perceptions (such as naturalistic images and photography), and conceptual images that embody/develop concepts [13]. The Swamp Thing character is shown in the form of a red-eyed monster with a body consisting of all kinds of swamp vegetations. This comic genre was originally horror with revenge motives. However, because the character has a duty to "protect", the narrative context then changed to superhero genre. Monster is a creature that is closely related to something scary, disgusting, and terrible.

Because of the Swamp Thing's unusual figure, which consists of parts of a swamp plant, tendrils, and growing shoots, the readers are given a sinister impression at first. When the Swamp Thing character turns into a part of the superhero genre, the reader's impression changes and becomes enthusiastic, respecting, and liking the character. Readers begin to see the other side of the fictional character from a more humanistic point of view that also fosters concern for nature.

From the changes in the genre of the characters and the impressions generated by the readers, there are interpretations of the Swamp Thing fictional character design, namely: (i) The character is designed based on something scary who planned to take revenge with all his might. At this point, the power of fear becomes the thing that is highlighted and dominates the character design, giving rise to a spooky and scary impression. (ii) The power of the character that is able to personify the power of nature can be interpreted as an attempt to make the reader realize that nature has more power, and that humans should appreciate the power of nature more, rather than be afraid of that power. (iii) Before turning into a monster, the main character in the comic was a scientist with his human nature. After the character changed, the reader is brought to be more humane in responding to the environment. The figure of the monster as the protector is considered as a protagonist entity in this comic. This creates sympathy for readers to see themselves and other living things as parts of the natural ecosystem and hints to ward off human domination over other entities.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 3.** The relation of human fear towards the personification of the forces of nature with nature conservation

Fear is an asset owned by every creature, including humans. Fear can prevent people from doing certain actions. Excessive fear will produce a phobia, which greatly interferes with the activities of the individual human being. In the context of environmental conservation, fear seems to be a barrier for someone not to cross the boundaries of the rules or laws that have been set. Environmental damage occurs because of violation acts committed against laws or regulations. A person can throw garbage in the river because they have no fear of the conditions that may result from the violation. This may happen because the person has not faced the consequences of his actions. Someone who has experienced a flood will understand and feel afraid of the impact of the flood. Thus, sharing experiences about these fears with others can act as action control (Figure 3).
In human religious life, there are beliefs about gods or figures who are the personification of the nature’s force. These figures are usually believed to have powers or abilities beyond the human limitations. Thus, artifacts, documents, or sites related to such figures receive special attention.

3.2. Media popularity and conservation efforts
Swamp Thing is a character that first appeared in comics media and then adopted in other media such as films, television series, graphic novels, games, and merchandise. There are five physical effects regarding the presence of mass-consumed media, namely economic effects, social effects, effects on daily activity scheduling, effects that eliminate certain feelings (escapism), and effects that foster certain feelings [14]. The level of popularity of these characters has the effect of media consumption that can be used to support the spirit and global movement for environmental care and nature conservation. The main function of the media, apart from fulfilling the entertainment needs of the audience, is to share information. Information regarding the preservation and conservation of the environment needs to be disseminated because the natural environment is the living space of various beings, including humans.

![Character designs are becoming popular](image1.png)

![Many media adopt character designs](image2.png)

![Flexible character design to convey messages](image3.png)

**Figure 4.** The relationship between the popularity of character designs and the flexibility of the content of the message conveyed

The popularity of the fictional character has the opportunity to spread a message, at least to its fans. Fans, whether consciously or not, will help spread the message. Although the dominance of the message will be covered by the battle scenario of the protagonist against the antagonist with other motives, the picture of nature with its tremendous power will be represented by the fictional character design of the Swamp Thing figure. The fictional character is an icon. Due to the mimetic process that makes a character or story partly resembles the real world in its creation, the icon becomes a 'pseudo realm' or pseudo reality that does not merely imitate the real world, but also presents alternative scenario [15].

The advantage of using fictional characters is the flexibility of the context that can be adapted from one scenario to another. The change in the context of a horror genre brought by the figure of a terror-spreading monster with a revenge motive was then replaced by a monster figure who is also a super hero with the mighty power of nature. The Swamp Thing character experiences changes from something that was despised and disgusted to a popular figure. This flexibility certainly has the opportunity to be used not only for one message, but also flexible to be used to convey other messages (Figure 4).

4. Conclusion
The result of this study is the identification of the use of the superhero character approach as the personification of natural forces that are considered scary by humans as an effort to preserve the environment and nature. Due to their fear, people are forced to obey the nature’s law. The parameters of the effectiveness of character design are seen from the sustainability and development of media that uses the character's design. From these facts, it can be concluded that almost all popular fictional characters can actually be used to convey special messages, such as preserving nature and the environment.
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