PALACKÝ UNIVERSITY IN OLOMOUC

Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

Alina Maksimava

The Influence of Objects in Joe Hill's *Locke & Key*

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. Elizabeth Allyn Woock, Ph.D.

Olomouc 2022

I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,

using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

In…………………………   Author's signature …………………………

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for the support they provided during the process of researching and writing this thesis. I would like to give special thanks to my supervisor Mgr. Elizabeth Allyn Woock, Ph.D., for her advice and patience.

Abstract

This bachelor's thesis deals with comics, their belonging to literature, and the analysis of non-human actors in the comic book *Locke & Key*. In the first chapter, I introduce the purpose of my thesis and state the method and goals of this work. In the second chapter, I examine the position of comics in terms of literariness and narrative aspects of comics. I deal with the problems of defining the medium and means by which comics ensure narrative cohesion. It also provides proof that *Locke & Key* is considered literature. The third chapter is about the origins, goals, and application of Actor-Network Theory and how it is applied to the comic book *Locke & Key* in order to determine the role of inanimate objects within plot and narration. I show the connection between keys, characters, and plot events and later suggest that inanimate keys could be viewed as characters. Finally, the results of the research are concluded in chapter four.

Key words: comics studies, Visual Language, Visual Narrative Grammar, narrative coherence, Actor-Network Theory, non-human actors, keys.

Annotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá komiksy, jejich zařazení k literatuře a analýzou neživých objektů jakožto postav v komiksu *Locke & Key*. V první kapitole vytyčuji cíle a způsoby výzkumu bakalářské práce. V druhé kapitole zkoumám postavení komiksů z hlediska jejich literárních a narativních aspektů. Zabývám se problémy definování tohoto média a prostředků, kterými komiksy zajišťují narativní soudržnost. Dále tato práce dokazuje, že komiks *Locke & Key* lze považovat za součást literatury. Třetí kapitola pojednává o původu, cílech a aplikaci Actor-Network teorie. V této kapitole se taky probírá její aplikace na komiks *Locke & Key* za účelem určení role neživých objektů v rámci vyprávění a dějové linie. Ukazuji spojení mezi klíči, postavami a dějovými událostmi a později dokazuji, že v tomto komiksu lze klíče považovat za postavy. Závěrem jsou výsledky výzkumu uzavřeny ve čtvrté kapitole.

Klíčová slova: komiksová studia, Visual Language, teorie Visual Narrative Grammar, narativní koherence, Actor-Network teorie, neživé objekty, klíče.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Over last century the position of comics studies went through numerous difficulties in literary field. Because of its multimodality scholars tended to disregard this medium. A populistic psychiatrist Fredric Wertham believed and advocated in *Seduction of the Innocent* for negative side effects that comics could have on young people.[1] He suggested that comics should be prohibited because of their violence, assuming that all comics only portray narratives that are immoral and those which cannot be written in prose. On the other hand, scholars like Douglas Wolk in one of his works compares comics to movies, stating that they both carry resemblance to literature but cannot be considered a part of it.[2]

Nevertheless, comics do not only resemble literature because they have textual elements, commonly published in a book form. They can be considered literature on the basis of their ability to communicate and give information, which constitutes narrative both visually and verbally. Aaron Meskin claims that treating comics as literature is problematic because it will lead to an overlook of visual element, and it will fail to recognize what is distinctive about the art form of comics.[3]

Thus, the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate narratological abilities of comics in both visual and verbal dimensions. With clear definition of comics and the ways they ensure narrativity this thesis will prove that comic book *Locke & Key* conforms to standards of its medium and to literary studies. In the second part of this thesis, I will analyze the function and influence of non-human agents, in particular keys, based on the Actor-Network Theory in above-mentioned literary work. The comic book presents a narrative with a complicated system of connections between characters and main events that constitute the general flow of the plot. However, the importance and persistent presence of keys is outstandingly prominent which suggests their influence in an established network. Based on the key events of the story, I will show how

---

[1] Pizzino, Christopher. "The Doctor versus the Dagger: Comics Reading and Cultural Memory." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): 632. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015748.
[2] Meskin, Aaron. "Comics as Literature?" The British Journal of Aesthetics 49, no. 3 (July 2009): pp. 223. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp026.
[3] Meskin, Aaron. "Comics as Literature?" The British Journal of Aesthetics 49, no. 3 (July 2009): pp. 224. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp026.

inanimate objects contribute to unfolding events through actions that only they can perform.

2. Comics as Literature

Through past decades comics studies get more scholarly attention and recognition as a literary medium. Comic books and strips are widely distributed and enjoyed by many people around the globe, academic publishers include this field of studies in their publications and some comics are adapted into different mediums or used in classrooms. With rising popularity and recognition, the interest in comics is increasing too. As a result of many studies on this topic, it is not adequate anymore to categorize and define comics based on the argument that they have book-like appearance and include words, or completely disregard them based on their moral value. Comics have elaborated systems of visual and verbal narratives, and storytelling. In this section I will examine these aspects to define the notion of "comic book" and state how *Locke & Key* abides by rules of literature.

2.1. Defining Comics and Problems That May Arise

In order to understand how comics belong to literary medium it is important to study the notion itself and its definition. Stating definitely "what are comics" is not an easy matter and many have tried to give a clear definition, yet it always has counterarguments and fails to include all essential aspects that create a category of comics. David Kunzle, a Professor of Art History at UCLA, proposes the following definition: a comic strip consists of "a sequence of separate images" with "a preponderance of image over text" that appears (and was originally intended to appear) in "a mass medium" and tells "a story which is both moral and topical."[4] However, this definition is very loose and imprecise. Kunzle proposes that picture dominates over the text. While for most comics and comic strips this proposition holds true, it does not apply to every one of them. For example, DC Comics' *Wonder Woman* (1941-1942) relies excessively on text to the point where there is almost no place for pictures to be juxtaposed and be in a proper sequence, and similarly comics like *Un Océan*

---

[4] Aaron Meskin, "Defining Comics?," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): pp. 369, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594x.2007.00270.x.

d'amour (2014) by Wilfrid Lupano are "mute" visual narratives that do not have text at all, yet they are widely accepted as being "comics".

Will Eisner made his own definition based on Kunzle's. He, however, decided to exclude the part focusing on the content and accented its structure, namely "a sequence of separate images" as it is a "sequential art," by which he means to pick out a distinctive "form of art, or method of expression."[5] The problem with this definition is that it is limited, and, as proposed by McCloud, does not differentiate comics from animation or any other sequentially ordered examples of art.[5] Additionally, not all comics can be considered art, since there are comics that are meant to be instructional or used for teaching various subjects, such as Japanese comic book *The Manga Guide to Regression Analysis* (2016) by Shin Takahashi and Iroha Inoue or *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994) by Scott McCloud, the exact work where he elaborated Eisner's definition adding juxtaposition as a means to differentiate animation and comics. As he claims:

> …animation is sequential in time but not spatially juxtaposed…
> Each successive frame in a movie is projected on exactly the same
> space – the screen – while each frame of comics must occupy a
> different space.[6]

Thus, he introduced his interpretation of comics as being

> …juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence,
> intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic
> response in the viewer.[6]

McCloud's definition is popular among contemporary scholars, but it overlooks two crucial aspects: form and narration.

Aaron Meskin, in his article "*Defining Comics?*" (2007) prior to stating Hayman and Pratt's definition which I would like to adopt, draws on David Carrier.[7] In his *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) Carrier presents a philosophical perspective on the comics medium. He states three necessary components of a comic book: a word balloon, a

[5] Aaron Meskin, "Defining Comics?," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): pp. 369, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594x.2007.00270.x.

[6] Scott McCloud, "Setting the Record Straight," in The Invisible Art Understanding Comics (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), pp. 7-9.

[7] Aaron Meskin, "Defining Comics?," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 65, no. 4 (2007): pp. 370, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594x.2007.00270.x.

"linked narrative", and a book-sized scale, where a word balloon is the most important aspect.[8] According to Carrier, balloon is the most prominent feature, because it represents combination and unity of word and image, which is both a visual and verbal element. Meskin, however, argues that although word balloons are a common way of representing direct speech and thought in a panel, it is not exclusive to it, since thought can be equally shown by the means of captions or be absent. Carrier's point regarding comic book scale is easily proved wrong. It holds true for the past decades, when the primal source of comics was either published as separate comic book anthologies or in magazine issues. With the advent of digitalization and internet, comics do not have to be in a physical form at all, or be book sized. Popular mass-culture internet comic strips that appear as webcomics can have few chapters or be stand-alone.

As the most suitable definition that takes into consideration actual functional aspects in comics, Hayman and Pratt propose the following:

> x is a comic if x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text.[9]

This definition acknowledges narrative as the most important part, rather than organization. It sets both textual and visual dimensions as a driving force of comics. In view of the fact that for the most part comics rely on images, it differentiates adequately between comics and children's literature. While images in the later do not aid the narration, in comics without images the narrative cannot be fully understood.

Since Hayman and Pratt's definition is based not solely on the medium's form but on its ability to represent a narration without differentiation in textual and visual dimensions but placing them as equal means of communication, it is the definition that I would like to adopt in this work. In the following sections, I will analyze both narrative powers, accentuating the visual dimension and showing how comics, their definition, and pictorial narration comply with the idea of "literariness."

---

[8] David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000): pp. 74.

[9] Aaron Meskin, "Defining Comics?," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 65, no. 4 (2007): pp. 370, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594x.2007.00270.x.

2.2. Visual Language as a Main Source of Narration

The reason why I prefer Hayman and Pratt's solution is because in contrast to all other attempts it does not examine comics solely on their structure. Neil Cohn makes an excellent point in dividing comics medium into form and function.[10] According to him, though comics consist of sequential images and text, they utilize these forms in a variety of different ways. Mostly, the purpose of a sequence of images is to define a narrative, and text is integrated into it to help establish and improve this narrative. Comics are not the only medium that uses this technique, as I mentioned before, illustrated children's literature similarly implements all three features. Cohn, thus, argues that in defining comics the focus should not be on existence of these components in a work, but on a role that they play.[10]

What Cohn proposes in order to resolve the issue is to separate form and function. Sequential images, as has been mentioned earlier, establish narrative and, simply put, tell a story. In this case, juxtaposed images can also be considered a visual language (VL), which author believes follows the same structural properties and mental processes as verbalized language but in a visual modality.[11] And in Cohn's sense, the word "language" is used literally as a mean of communication. It is further supported by his theory of Visual Narrative Grammar (VNG) which is based on contemporary linguistic theories that separate grammar from the meaning, and it has been designed to describe the structure of drawn sequential images.[12] Studies of VNG have shown that VL evokes similar neural responses as manipulations of syntax in sentences.[12] The ultimate goal of his theories is to treat comics as having bimodal structure and analyzing VL separately from written textual component. This will give a bigger opportunity to study comics as a literary and cultural category and free it from the grasp of "art" that many people tend to apply to comics, since images provide not only an appealing response in an individual but have a far more important role of communication.

---

[10] Neil Cohn, "Un-Defining Comics." International Journal of Comic Art, Vol. 7 (2) (2005): pp. 1.
[11] Neil Cohn, "From Visual Narrative Grammar to Filmic Narrative Grammar: The Narrative Structure of Static and Moving Images," in Film Text Analysis New Perspectives on the Analysis of Filmic Meaning (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 96.
[12] Neil Cohn, "From Visual Narrative Grammar to Filmic Narrative Grammar: The Narrative Structure of Static and Moving Images," in Film Text Analysis New Perspectives on the Analysis of Filmic Meaning (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 96.

VL similarly to any other language, be it English, Spanish, or French, has its own structure and discourse. In that case they are realized through semantic cues within images. Cohn summarizes sequential "syntax" by, what he calls, Canonical narrative schema: [Phase X (Establisher) – (Initial) – Peak – (Release)],[13] where Establisher is a set up for an interaction, it is the introductory act (or scene) which is for most of the time passive; Initial shows a preparatory action before the main act, it sets the tension of a narrative; Peak is the main point of an event, the main action where tension is at its maximum; and lastly Release, as the name suggests, releases the tension, shows the falling action of the main event structure of a given panel sequence, or phase. Since not all phases need to contain all these categories, Cohn placed the non-obligatory elements in parentheses. Peak, however, is the head of a phase the same way that Noun is the head of a Noun Phrase, so it is obligatory and cannot be dropped.

An example could be seen in a comic book series by Joe Hill *Locke & Key*, Vol 1. "Welcome to Lovecraft," Issue #1, when one of the characters, Bode Locke, decides to open a strange black door with a key with a scull. In the first panel we see a door on the outer side of the house which the young protagonist is trying to open, which serves as an Establisher. Next panel differs from the first one only in one detail – the presence of a sound effect. The same image but with the word "click" resembling the sound of an opening lock is the Initial, showing the preparation before the main event – opening and going through the door. Panel with a boy looking and going through the door is a modifying constituent, or Refiner. Finally, a Peak panel is introduced, showing Bode's soul going through the door, leaving his body in the house, which is the main action that previous panels were building up to. Later panels, before the Release, are Refiners that come after the head Peak panel. These narrative elements are presented and comply with those established in a literature narrative schema. Such groupings of images are a part of bigger and more complex structures, and when they reach a maximal node, they form an "Arc" and narrative categories apply to individual panels and whole constituents. In this example, an Arc consists of a narrative of Bode finding a key on a door frame, trying to get it, opening and going through the door, being shocked by his soul separating from his body, running back inside, and, lastly, slamming the door.

---

[13] Neil Cohn, "From Visual Narrative Grammar to Filmic Narrative Grammar: The Narrative Structure of Static and Moving Images," in Film Text Analysis New Perspectives on the Analysis of Filmic Meaning (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 97.

Cohn introduces two other narrative schemas, which together with the Canonical narrative schema "align with the same basic principles of combination found at the syntactic level (Culicover and Jackendoff 2005, Jackendoff 2002)."[14] These are Perspective Shifts and Conjunctions. Perspective Shifts are head-modifiers that provide a different viewpoint of the same information. For example, if in the scene mentioned earlier the Initial panel with a sound effect gets deleted, then the Refiner image with Bode peeking through the door would become an Initial, because it is a modifier of a head. Thus, it could be changed for a different panel showing the same information but from a different angle, and it could be an image showing a key in the keyhole.

Conjunction is a way to expand a sequence through the repetition of narrative categories[14] when a category repeats within a phase of that category. Simply put, different images when put together form an equivalent for a one bigger scene. In *Locke & Key*, Vol 1. "Welcome to Lovecraft," Issue #3, a Conjunction could be seen in the scene with a Kinsey Locke, one of the protagonists, participating in a running race. First, we see a panel with two girls running, and the Conjunction of two panels showing Kinsey's legs during the run, and a close-up of her face, which, if deleted, do not change the perspective and overall narrative of the Arc. Cohn presents this type of Conjunction as an N-Conjunction, the one that shows parts of a single character. Moreover, Conjunctions can represent actions or events (A-Conjunction), characters within a scene (E-Conjunction), and disparate semantically associated elements (S-Conjunction).

According to the syntactic rules above, the comic book in question in this thesis adheres to them. Issues of *Locke & Key* rely on the visual narrative in setting scenes and depicting actions with established patterns. Each sequence of pictures with the same structure follows canonical narration schemes of Exposition – Rising Action – Climax – Falling Action – Denouement, but in a scope of smaller Arcs, that together constitute the whole narration following the same rules.

---

[14] Neil Cohn, "From Visual Narrative Grammar to Filmic Narrative Grammar: The Narrative Structure of Static and Moving Images," in Film Text Analysis New Perspectives on the Analysis of Filmic Meaning (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 100.

2.3. Space and Its Realization in Visual Dimension

The way panels work together is in the McCloud's notion of closure, realized through gutters. Gutters are the spaces between panels which represent either common space that separates the panels or an invisible action that links said panels together. There are two types of space in comics: space that is shown in panels, and space in gutters, both of which considerably contribute to the narrative ability of comics.

In the empty spaces of gutters, readers construct meaningful connections and fill in the gaps of information. Kai Mikkonen in his work *The Narratology of Comic Art* (2017) says that temporal transitions between panels are remarkably common in comics and appear to be considered as a default expectation.[15] And when pictures containing information are juxtaposed, Mikkonen states that very little seems to be needed for a reader to suggest a relation and story happening. The other main function of the gutters is to show a temporal progression between panels. Since a static image in comics can portray a different amount of time that the reader perceives, it determines the reader's pace of reading and comprehension of narration. While a quick succession of pictures portrays a mere opening of the door which happens almost in an instant, a picture can illustrate a moment, where a character has a long and complex internal monologue, or similarly two characters can have a lengthy turn-taking dialogue. These examples show how immensely different time is portrayed through VL, leaving it free for an interpretation of the reader.

The continuity of time and space between panels is suggested by number of formal devices. Mikkonen suggests expanding graphics elements, embedding of frames, and the modification of space between the panels.[16] For example, repetitive images of the same setting create a sense of continuity between pictures. I would like to return to the example with Bode opening a strange black door with a scull on it. The setting of this scene is in the backyard of the house, picturing a side of the wall with the door. The repetition of setting ensures the visual connectivity between scenes: event of finding the key and subsequent opening and closing of the door. The whole arc is separated by a shift to another action, and when suddenly it returns to Bode, the

---

[15] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 38.

[16] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 45.

reader knows what is happening because the same setting points towards already familiar events.

Other than a layout and relation between panels, graphic style also indicates continuity and transitions between them. While Western and European comics mostly follow this, it is different with Japanese manga, where a sudden change of graphic style for a few panels often occurs. A purpose is to either emphasize an object giving it a narratological weight by adding more details to it, or to "downgrade" an image by making it more cartoon, which is used to highlight character's emotion. This change happens on the basis of difference of "styles" – the degree of iconicity that is a choice of an author/artist. All images in comics that portray places, people, objects, or ideas are icons of this places, people, objects, or ideas. The notion itself is abstract and in terms of art it means that pictures are meant to resemble their subjects.[17] The degree of such iconicity varies from realistic representational art, which imitates real life and focuses on details, to simple cartoon pictures. In terms of *Locke & Key,* the art style presents a degree of iconicity, contributing to comic's mode of gothic contemporary fantasy by giving the reader an idea that the world and actions in the comic are not real. Muted color pallet and black bold outline of characters and objects signalizes the gothic motifs and sets the atmosphere. The iconicity, however, is not permanent through the whole series. In Vol 4. "Keys to the Kingdom," Issue #1, the art style has a greater degree of iconicity when portraying events from Bode's point of view, and a regular style, when it's from antagonist's side. This establishes the comparison of childlike innocent good side of a boy, who used the key out of curiosity and later was trying to save his siblings with the help of birds, and an evil corrupted force that does everything from emotional manipulations to violence and murder to achieve its goals.

Similarly, the repetitions, conjunctions, or juxtaposition of pictorial elements of the story can create further narrative connections. Characters and their actions, the character's continuing perspective, the repetition of other subjects through two and more panels, some prominent features of the story world or particularly significant situations create a coherence within the narration, which the reader unconsciously interprets and pays attention to. The constant repetition of three siblings from the beginning to the end of the story suggests that they are important components of the narrative, and the reader grasps the idea that they are protagonists. The same could be

---

[17] Scott McCloud, "The Vocabulary of Cimics," in The Invisible Art Understanding Comics (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), pp. 27.

applied to objects, since the excessive presence of keys points towards their greater story weight. Thus, the relation between panels, their layout and consistency of graphic style is of significant importance. VL establishes narratives and its visual properties characterize comics, not the spaces between pictures.

The layout of panels on the page and visual style of textual elements further contributes to connectivity. Pratt stated that the choices artists make in drawing word balloons, captions, or sound effects, serve storytelling purposes.[18] These help artists to create a mood, emotional context, or any other artistic response in the reader. An example could be found in *Locke & Key*, Vol 1. "Welcome to Lovecraft," Issue #1, when a fight between two character occurs. The choice of panel layout being scattered all around page with no visible gutters, which are painted unusually black, a big font of sound effects being drawn in a deviant way, portrays the sense of danger that was escalating. It contributes to creating an unsettling, horrific feelings of chaotic fight for a life. It also shows the emotional and mental state of a character without any written words other than the sound of a gun shooting.

Visual space presented in panels can establish other meanings. The choice of background might signal personality traits of the characters. Pascal Lefèvre in his work *The Construction of Space in Comics* (2009) mentions how decorations of a room can suggest information about characters, for example, whether the room is messy or organized, modern or classic,[19] with many decorations or plain, and so forth. This function of VL is predominantly descriptive – a scene of a room or a character does not move a story forward, but aids to the narration. The reader builds a story world and expects an analogy with a real life, establishing a consistent space that is filled in the gutters and coherently combined between panels. Comparable to real life, the reader is aware of the existing space other than the one that is explicitly presented. In comics, the visual cues of narrative connectivity are mostly given as overlaps of panels, setting, and drawing style.

The reader is able to easily identify these cues because they are foregrounded, and some of the formal features that highlight them have already been stated. The degree of iconicity (cartoon-like vs. realistic resemblance), drawing style, color palette

[18] Henry John Pratt, "Narrative in Comics," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 67, no. 1 (February 2009): pp. 109, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2008.01339.x.

[19] Jeet Heer, Kenton Worcester, and Pascal Lefèvre, "The Construction of Space in Comics," in *A Comics Studies Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), pp. 155.

and panels layout influence the reader's comprehension and ensures that the right entity has gained attention. This not only benefits the story but also aids the narrative coherence.

2.4. Narratological Coherence in Characters and Their Movement

Apart from setting a story world and establishing mood, the visual aspect of narration is relied upon to emphasize storytelling by the most common means – through the character's movement, body language, and actions or situations they are engaged in. Looking back on the previous section, I focused on the importance of setting and describing function, which could be likened to telling in a written novel. However, with the presence of characters that are actively engaged in an action, comics do not rely solely on telling but constantly shift to showing within one story.[20] What is considered as "showing" in literary narratives is distinctive from showing in comics. In novels this expression means to portray a situation as directly as possible using direct speech in dialogues or characters' thoughts that readers read word by word.[20] In comics images enhance narrative function and meaning by showing the action itself.

Characters' movement and body language are one of the instruments used to create a coherent flow by showing. Even minor movement or emotional change contribute to particular results. In *Locke & Key,* Vol 1. "Welcome to Lovecraft," Issue #1, in one of the scenes a teenage boy, named Tyler Locke, is showed sitting on a bench at his father's funeral. In a succession of fifteen panels a reader witnesses the devasted condition of the protagonist. While others try to make a conversation with him by trying to change the topic to something silly and try to comfort him, he sits, palms locked, looking somewhere in the distance. The significance of this scene lies in boy's silence and posture. Based only on the way the author portrayed him looking disassociated, sulking, his head down, or looking almost furious when an inappropriate remark is made, a reader makes inferences, which slowly move the story forward. A depiction of the lonely character better shows his emotional state and sets the scene; Tyler's body language communicates a lot without the need for text to be involved.

---

[20] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 76.

The repetitive presence of a character further creates continuity in narration. Often comic artists in their work choose a group of characters and shift attention between them, portraying actions or events from different points of view. A persistent presence of characters and their thoughts, emotions and experiences is a strong argument which was mentioned by Mikkonen, since it allows the reader to establish a person-like entity which is immersed in action or situation.[21] If someone or something regularly experiences such situations, then it is an active agent, and foregrounded characters tend to be so. Artists use visual cues mentioned earlier to draw attention to specific characters. When a character or group of characters are foregrounded, and the reader starts to follow these characters through the whole story they gain narrative weight. By having a direct access and understanding of character's intentions and feelings, the reader gets emotionally involved in the story. This process of following is a basic feature of all narratives, regardless of the medium, as Mikkonen argues.[22] Therefore, above-mentioned criteria abide by narrative standards that are established and accepted in literary field, since many literary narratologists state that the presence of an experiential agent is a minimal requirement of narrativity[23] and in *Locke & Key* there are 4 salient human characters: three protagonists and an antagonist, and a few non-human actors with agency, that have heavy visual and narrative involvement.

2.5. Textual Dimension of Comics

A standard comic book or graphic narrative has two different narratives, one visual and one textual, which are essential to each other and cannot be easily separated without loss of meaning. Textual elements enhance visual narration. To understand the message of a comic a reader must pay attention to both dimensions and work out the spaces in the gutters. However, while reading comics the reader first pays attention to written text and later to images.

Comics are a narrative medium – both visually and verbally they tell stories.[24] And as it was previously stated, images and words in comics are closely intertwined.

---

[21] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 91.
[22] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 103.
[23] Kai Mikkonen, *The Narratology of Comic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 91.
[24] Charles Hatfield, Bart Beaty, and Isaac Cates, "The Graphic Novel," in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), pp. 82.

The visual style refers not only to pictorial side of the medium, but also textual. The way words are portrayed influences the experiences of the reader. I have already showed how different stylistic choices of panel layout, size and color influence the narrative, and in this aspect, words are closely related to them. The visual representation of textual elements can be altered and thus hold the position of the narrative voice.[25] For instance, the size and font of the text can symbolize a volume and texture of someone's speech, or the color choice of background and the text itself can help to set the mood and bring reader's attention. In the horror mode of comics, a common way to portray an evil spirit or creature would be to use an inverted pallet (white text over the black background) or red ink for the text to emphasize the eerie sound and speech. This strong visual element is crucial for understanding the inner emotions or background of some characters and thus is important for the meaning of the whole story.

Similarly to novels, narration in comics is often expressed through textual narration, though only partly. It is presented in a comic by different means, one of the most prominent as a text in a box within or outside of the panel, belonging to either impersonal narrator or one of the characters, also known as captions. Captions speak directly to the reader, representing either the voice of the narrator, both first and second-person, or directly represent thoughts of characters. Generally, captions are located under the panel and contain the words. Because of that, captions have an aura of "literariness".[26]

Additionally to narration, words are presented in comics as "word balloons" that represent direct speech or thoughts of a character and are placed within the panel where character is. This allows readers to connect words with the character. Unlike captions, word balloons do not stretch over multiple panels. Instead, each panel in a succession has a balloon, which are connected by their "tails", creating continuity of the speech. It is also fairly common to ensure the cohesion of a speech through separation of sentences into multiple parts and this way speech gets stretched. When speech is divided into parts and depicted in different panels, it creates a feeling of spontaneity and the rapidness of a moment.

---

[25] Charles Hatfield, Bart Beaty, and Jan Baetens, "Words and Images," in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), pp. 198.
[26] Charles Hatfield, Bart Beaty, and Jan Baetens, "Words and Images," in *Comics Studies: A Guidebook* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), pp. 200.

What differentiates comics and novels, however, are pictures of words that can occur as a text within a panel, which are part of the perspective of characters, words that they can see. In terms of narration, these could create a setting, for example the depiction of a road sign that shows location. The importance of this type of writing in a comic is exclusively in the perspective because it gives an insight into the situation or character's emotional state, as it would happen if reader were shown a page of a protagonist's dairy. Since any object with visible words in character's possession is directly seen inside the story world of a character, it could have higher narrative significance.

Additionally, the other textual elements that are in comics are the sound effects, which directly reflect the sound they are supposed to portray visually. They are usually drawn in a typeface in a variety of sizes, styles, and colors. Sound effects range from the sound of movement, e.g., "flinch", to any onomatopoeia, sounds of gun shooting, explosions, and even laughter, which explains the diversity of artistic choice in their depiction. They further increase the level of reader's involvement and pace of reading, because they create the illusion of flow of time or add to the atmosphere.

Textual elements in comics enhance visual narration and vice versa, and in *Locke & Key* this function of both dimension is clearly visible. In a comic book narration is presented in a form of thoughts of different characters and through dialogues. The reader understands and is involved in events because of the knowledge of the characters' intentions that they directly express in that way. Vol 1. "Welcome to Lovecraft," Issue #4, page 23, shows a scene of Sam Lesser going to the Locke's mansion by bus after escaping prison with the help of an antagonist. His goal is to help his savior get keys. First two panels show how a woman with a baby gets out of her seat and whispers something to the driver. However, through the thoughts of Sam, the reader understands the woman's actions, his intentions and future events, since he says to the reader:

> I don't trust the woman with the baby. She's been staring at me
> since Saugus. She knows something. I think she recognized me.[27]

In the last panel on the page, Sam is shown getting a gun out of his jacket accompanied by boxes of text:

---

[27] Hill, Joe, and Rodríguez Gabriel. Locke & Key: Volume 1 – Welcome to Lovecraft, Issue #4. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing 2009, pp. 23.

Dodge set me free and now I have to return the favor. I just need
the key.[27]

Through the little series of Sam's thoughts and visual elements, the reader is introduced to his reasoning for going to the Locke's mansion and understands that he is going to eliminate everything that he views as a potential obstacle. The reader learns that the woman found Sam suspicious not on the basis of his looks, but because she recognized a criminal. Thus, two dimensions complement each other and create a cohesive narration.

Thus, narrativity in comics is the strong argument in favor of literariness of this medium. Comparably to movies and animation, comics are different not only because of their textual elements. In animation each panel is presented to the viewer for a set time and after being shown the viewer cannot naturally return to it. In comics, when all panels are presented on one page the reader sees each of them and determines his own reading pace based on the events and actions portrayed. Moreover, pictorial and textual elements have a consistent presence of narration and abide by narrative rules. These factors support the argument and on the basis of examples drawn from *Locke & Key*, it is safe to assume that this comic book is literature.

3. Actor-Network Theory and How it Determines Objects as Characters

The isolated elements that are used in applying Cohn's theory describing a Visual Grammar (the Canonical Narrative Schema) can be isolated again and applied to a different theory. Through the Actor-Network Theory objects are isolated in a network and their connections are analyzed in relation to other actors, which simultaneously with a Visual Grammar can show the role of the visual objects within the larger narrative. In this section prior to analyzing objects in a comic through the close reading, I will provide an information about origins and logic behind the Actor-Network Theory, also explaining how it could be applied in literary analysis. In addition, I will state its disadvantages when implemented in a certain way on a work to establish interpretation. Next, I will implement the theory on my analysis in order to prove that keys in the comic could be viewed as minor characters on the basis that they have an agency within story's network.

3.1. Actor-Network Theory and Its Application in Literature

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a theoretical approach to social theory co-proposed by Bruno Latour, French philosopher and sociologist, that first appeared as an approach to the study of science in Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* (1979) and then in Latour's *Science in Action* (1987).[28] Since then, ANT has been largely associated with sociological and andragogical studies, though in last decade it has expanded its influence into other fields, such as media studies, science, art, technology, etc. It is an influential theory that is based on the concept that any single actor is in a network with many other actors, that together constitute further actors that coordinate action.[29] Based on this theory, an actor is not only an entity that has intentions,

---

[28] Nicolas Bencherki, "Actor–Network Theory," *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*, August 2017, pp. 1, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc002.

[29] Felski, Rita. "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2016, pp. 748. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/complitstudies.53.4.0747.

consciousness, or autonomy, but all phenomena that make a difference.[30] Latour mentioned in his work *On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications* (1996) that:

> … actors are not conceived as fixed entities but as flows, as circulating objects undergoing trials, and their stability, continuity, isotopy has to be obtained by other actions and other trials.[31]

ANT works on the basis that all actors, whether human or non-human, have an equally important role that contributes to the whole structured network. But the question of "Who are the actors?" is one that arises first. While Rita Felski's clarification mentioned above summarizes non-human actors, it is worth mentioning once again that any entity whose existence has an impact is considered to be a non-human actor: things, objects, beasts, animals, natural phenomena, tools, buildings and other material structures, inventions and artifacts, and other.[32] To understand the principle behind this theory, I would like to draw an example that many are familiar with. In a classroom, everything has its own purpose and role. A teacher does not have a more important role than a student, blackboard, chair, or door handle. If there is no chair, then student cannot sit, and without the door handle one cannot enter the room, which would defeat the purpose of having a classroom in the first place. Thus, actors do not have independence, they operate exclusively through their network. Actors are tied not by limits to their action, but by their co-creation.[33] ANT is concerned with the search of entities and how they are influenced and influence other actors by relations between them. The theory, hence, could be applied in various fields and literary criticism.

In literary studies it is argued by Felski, that traditional use of ANT for an interpretation is insufficient in terms of the analysis of the meaning of a whole work.[34] According to her and Latour, the overemphasis of relations among different actors eliminates visible differences between them.[34] When doing a close reading, the task is

---

[30] Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): pp. 738. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.

[31] Latour, Bruno. "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications." Soziale Welt 47, no. 4 (1996): pp. 374. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163.

[32] Sayes, Edwin. "Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say That Nonhumans Have Agency?" Social Studies of Science 44, no. 1 (2014): pp. 136. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43284223.

[33] Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): pp. 749. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.

[34] Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): pp. 738. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.

to analyze as many actors as possible and to recognize specifics of connection and means by which they are caused. Many factors in this case are being overlooked and since agency could be uncertain it diverts attention from the text's essential meaning.[35] However, it also gives various means of describing and helps to determine new perspectives. The other way ANT is implemented into analysis is by drawing on a sociology of networks that "…can be exceptionally illuminating but seems remote from the interpretative concerns of literary studies."[34] Literary pieces are viewed in a bigger socio-historical context and analyzed as having an influence on society or other fields. She concludes, that in terms of interpreting it is appropriate to approach it as "middle reading".[36] A single work should not be reviewed exclusively on its own properties and meaning, nor should it be approached by the notion of social impact, historical background, its influence on other work or form the point of a literary system, but between these two forms.

Whilst I agree with her premise, in this work I am not concerned with the interpretation of content and effects of the comic book *Locke & Key,* nor its influence on the medium and social groups. Hence, I will incorporate Actor-Network Theory into the analysis of volumes of the comic book by tracing out the influence, connections and causes of agents and non-human actors to prove that specific objects within the story world could be viewed as static characters with agency, which directly influence characters and alter space, that creates an impact on the plot itself. I will select a few non-human agents and look at their connections in a network of characters and plot events. The application of ANT as a middle reading, nonetheless, is a good starting point for what will hopefully be future research on the analysis of comics as literature, taking into consideration the meaning of the work, importance of all characters within it, and sociological and historical context that influence the work in question, and subsequently the impact that literary work creates.

---

[35] Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): pp. 739.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.
[36] Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." PMLA 130, no. 3 (2015): pp. 741.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.

3.2. The Plot of *Locke & Key*

Keys in the work of Joe Hill and Gabriel Rodriguez occupy and possess a lot of narratological weight. Starting from the coverage of the first issue of the comic the reader grasps the idea that keys are not figurative symbols. Even the name of the comic is foregrounded, where the word "Key" is illustrated as a part of a key, and "Locke" has two keyholes in the letters "o" and "c". However, it does not give any more information than that. The deviation of the symbol of the key on the cover and the name suggests that it is an important object in the comic book. Additionally, the persistent presence of physical keys inside the story world and the characters' obsession with them make them salient and noticeable, which leads to the reader following them and paying attention to any mention by the characters. The following of the characters is, what I discussed in previous chapters, the evidence pointing towards narrative importance. However, entities that are followed are considered to be agents, which an ordinary key without any personification is probably not. It is a tool that people use to open a lock, either on a door, box, or car. Yet, in *Locke & Key* keys influence not doors, but space, characters, and plot. Moreover, the consistent visual presence of keys inside panels marks them as salient from other background objects. But before analyzing the ways in which such developments occur, it is crucial to know the events of the plot itself.

The plot of the comic book is not in a chronological order and often the author uses flashbacks to the past. Some chapters show protagonists travelling to the past, witnessing events of particular events in a third-person experience. This journey, nonetheless, introduces characters and readers to first events of the plot, which is set in the eighteenth century during the American Revolution. While hiding in caves, Benjamin Locke and his comrades found a black door which led to another dimension filled with demons of Leng, who possess anyone with whom they have physical contact. If the demon fails to find a host, it then transforms into a metal. Benjamin uses this metal to make magical keys and seal the Black Door.

Although the plot starts with events long gone in history, the first issue of the story revolves around three Locke siblings – Tyler, Kinsey, and Bode. After the tragic event of Sam Lesser murdering their father, Rendell, the Locke family decides to move to their ancestral manor, a Keyhouse Manor, in Lovecraft, Massachusetts in 2011. The

manor is in the possession of Locke's since it was constructed in the eighteenth century and was passed down through generations. The way it is illustrated in the comic reflects the comic's mode – an enormous, alienated castle-like manor with secret passages situated on the seashore of the town, near a big cliff with a cave follows the most important rule of the gothic setting. The mode is indeed a horror contemporary fantasy, with dark forces in the form of a demon from another world that is as the antagonist a menace to humanity. After arrival at their new home, the protagonists try to adapt to their new environment and life, when suddenly Bode, the youngest of them, finds a strange key on top of the frame of the black door. This event advances the story since Bode discovers that the key has a mysterious power. Bode and other siblings start to find magical keys around the mansion, and in the process, Bode meets a mysterious woman named Dodge in the Wellhouse, who claims to be his echo. She asks the boy to bring her some of the magical keys and later escapes from the Wellhouse using Anywhere Key.

Dodge is corrupted by the demon soul of Lucas Caravaggio, Rendell's childhood friend. In 1988 a group of Rendell Locke's friends, Lucas Caravaggio, Erin Voss, Kim Topher, Mark Cho, and Ellie Whedon, who called themselves the Keepers of the Keys and tried to get a special metal, Whispering Iron, to create a new key. Due to an unfortunate event, Lucas gets possessed by the demon, whose objective is to get access to Black Door and allow its kin to escape into the human world. In Dodge's attempt to kill the other members of the group to achieve his goal, Rendell kills him in the Drowning Caves. Later, however, he regains a physical form through the Wellhouse.

In the present days of the story, Dodge continues his action and tries to collect as many keys as possible. He used Gender Key to become Zach Wells (an original Lucas's form) and befriend the siblings. When his true identity and intentions are revealed, he switches bodies with Bode and pursues his goal by freely moving around the mansion. When he finds Omega Key, he uses the tradition of high school students to have and has an after-prom party in the cave to open the Omega door and release several demons. Many students fall victims during the event after Tyler defeats Dodge and uses an Alpha Key to eliminate other demons. Though Bode's body is cremated soon after, he returns from the ghost state in the epilogue.

The importance of the plot relates to the keys as primary mediators for the antagonist's actions and plans. It is the main objective of both sides since protagonists have the role of keeping keys safe and preventing keys' power from abusive misuse. All main characters rely on keys, which determine keys as a stable point in a network of the mansion and characters. Based on the Actor-Network Theory, the influence of keys on the plot can be traced and evaluated, stating their role and significance. In the following chapters, I will analyze five different keys and their position in the network and state why keys are the characters in the story.

3.3. The First Key and Its History

Magical keys were created by members of the Locke family throughout the centuries. The first key in the existence, Omega Key, was created by their ancestor Benjamin Locke, who specialized in making keys and padlocks. During the Revolution, Benjamin and his comrades were hiding in the Drowning Caves near the future location of Locke's mansion, when they accidentally discovered and opened the mysterious Black Door, which allowed demons known as Children of Leng to escape into the human world. These demons are depicted as grey creatures in a black realm with fangs, claws, and numerous yellow eyes with thin pupils, resembling those of a snake. In the human realm, however, they cannot survive without a host – a soul of a human to which they attach, otherwise, they perish and become a special metal, Whispering Iron. After a series of struggles with the possessed friend, Benjamin manages to retrieve demons' corpses and creates an Omega Key with a padlock to close the door and prevent evil entities from invading the world.

Omega Key is the most important key which prevents a disaster. It is a non-human actor in a network of the natural order of the story world. The key is the medium that allows for more to happen than is logically anticipated. All keys open some locks, which do not have to be a door. However, the presence of the door in the cave signifies that there is a space that exists behind that door and that correlates to the natural order. For instance, if there is a door in a house on the fifth floor, no one expects it to lead directly to the basement without stairs and a long corridor. A similar suggestion could be applied with the Black Door. Since it is in a cave that has the function of a bunker, it is expected that it would separate a corridor and an analogous room, not a realm of

a completely different world. While the primary actor here is the door, Omega Key permanently closes it and ensures that nothing from the other side comes through and only this key could be used to open it again. In later decades of the story, this key is repeatedly used in order to gain more Whispering Iron and create more keys. Because these keys are made of iron that is beyond the natural rules of the world, they have magical abilities whether combined with their respective padlock or not.

Thus, Omega Key is one of the main objects in the series that is in the center of the whole network. It influences the plot by giving it a reason to exist, tying in and connecting characters in the story through generations. The first magical key in existence, which is an objective of the villain and an object that the protagonists are protecting, sets the rivalry and is the reason behind unfolding events. It prevents the two worlds from having contact. When the door was first found by Benjamin, it did not have a lock on it. It is implied that if the door opens, it cannot be closed, and the only way to prevent evil forces from stepping in is not to touch them. But people and demons are drawn to each other's worlds, which means that leaving the door open would lead to destruction. Since Benjamin Locke was a craftsman and worked with metal and keys, it naturally appeared to be an appropriate solution to create a key. If it is made with metal coming from a different world, then it would successfully keep the door closed. Similarly, only Omega Key can open this door, making it an obligatory instrument in the process of making new magical keys. Omega Key is thus the threshold for misfortunes and devastating situations that changed the lives of dozens of characters, leading to destruction, deaths, or new miracles if used in the right way.

3.4. Head and Echo Keys and Their Impact

Throughout the whole series and stand-alone issues, the reader is introduced to a total of forty keys, each with its unique ability. Some of the keys are briefly mentioned, and their appearance or function is unknown. Other keys alter the abilities of the user – a Giant Key changes the wielder into a giant. Yet, the story has a significantly more complicated key. These keys serve as important points in the plot of the story. Examples of such keys are Echo and Head Key, which narratively are as important as Omega Key.

For three narrators, Head Key is a means of entertainment and mind-altering. As its name suggests, Head Key gives a user access to minds and memories. The keyhole for this key appears on the back of a person's neck whenever the key is at the appropriate distance. In the comic, this access is depicted as an odd shift of perspective, when any character can directly see into his own opened head in a third person, as if creating a visual clone. It is not limited to a person on whom the key was used, but anyone can see the content inside. Every emotion, memory, or knowledge is portrayed as a physical representation and can easily be added or removed. With the help of this key, Kinsey takes out emotions that are bothering and affecting her state, and Tyler uses it to add whole homework reading and later to hide Omega Key in his head. While now children use this powerful instrument for their benefit, the Keepers of the Keys viewed it as a solution to seal the demon out of Lucas's body and save their friend. They removed all of his corrupted thoughts and memories and put them into jars in a secluded place. However, Lucas recovered them by using Ellie Whedon. He later used the key to extract a piece of himself and hide it in Ellie's house as a backup plan and later emptied Erin Voss's mind in order to find Omega Key, causing her insanity. The key, however, does have a limitation of use since the key failed to create a keyhole on Rufus Whedon's head, the son of Ellie. His mind functions differently from others because of his mental disorder causing some of the keys to work on him in unique ways.

Head Key proves to be an impactful mediator in the story. Its ability to transform memories and feelings into tiny living beings alters not only character but the world itself. Such emotions taken out of their habitat are able to act according to their personality and have freedom of action and movement. The existence of emotions outside of characters minds leads to direct danger because they cannot be destroyed or controlled. Because anything could be removed or added, intrusive and violent thoughts can be used as a weapon. This scenario happened when Dodge created his backup plan: he used a physical part of his memory to manipulate Ellie inside her head. With the help of this key, the antagonist influenced Kinsey by encouraging her to make an irrational decision. After she removed crying and fear from her mind, she was not afraid of anything. This fearlessness caused her to act recklessly and impose greater danger upon her siblings. When these removed emotions escaped from the bottle, they eventually reached Tyler and found their way into his head. That way Dodge, who at the time was in Bode's body, found the Omega key which was hidden there. Head Key

is, thus, a strategical object in the clash between the protagonists and the demon. It gives an enormous power over anyone within the story, giving the phrase "to mess with someone's head" a literal meaning. The impact this ability creates varies from gaining more knowledge to changing the whole personality and likely being insane if it is abused.

If Bode had never found the key, the siblings would not have trusted Dodge and his disguise of Zach Wells. Kinsey trusted him enough not to question his intentions. She was not concerned about his reactions when he witnessed their effects because she did not have any fear. Moreover, Dodge would not have found Omega Key in Tyler's head that was also placed there using the same key. Most importantly, Dodge would not have been able to return after his death in the cave in the twentieth century. This key impacts the events of the plot and seemingly connects them.

Echo Key is similar in its complexity and ability to change the natural system. For this key to work, it should be used on the Wellhouse near the Keyhouse mansion. The Wellhouse itself does not have anything that strikes the reader's attention and presents nothing but a well with water on its own. However, after using the key, a user can summon an "echo" of a deceased person, connecting the afterlife and the real world inside the Wellhouse. The summoned echo represents the soul of a departed person, which is allowed to exist only within the Wellhouse. The intended rule is that the soul cannot leave or enter through the door regardless of its intentions: the soul completely vanishes when it is exposed to the other side. But to every rule, there seems to be an exception.

The Wellhouse is the place where Bode meets Dodge for the first time. Moreover, Dodge called Sam Lesser using an Echo Key and promised him a better future in exchange for other keys. This interaction led to Rendell's death and subsequent escape with Anywhere Key. In both episodes, Sam plays a considerable role and unpredictably changes events. Sam contributes to the demon's freedom because the demon uses a dangerous situation Sam creates to force Bode to find and bring him Anywhere Key. Yet, the role of Echo Key is not restricted to two events only. During the accident in the nineteenth century, after Dodge took a fragment of his memories to manipulate Ellie', the tiny version of Dodge from Erin Voss's memories persuaded Ellie to use the key to summon Lucas's echo. Considering the fact that demons need to attach themselves to human souls to survive, the summoned echo was not Lucas but the demon.

The existence and function of Echo Key allow for the impossible to be possible. While Dodge's plans are achievable because of his outstanding planning of multiple steps in advance, he would not be able to return if the key did not exist. His escape from the well only aided him in terms of efficiency. In case he never managed to obtain Anywhere Key, he would use the key he already had to further manipulate vulnerable people. The primary ability of the key is to allow the contact between the human realm and the afterlife, but Dodge successfully used it to his advantage and managed to communicate with a person who was at a significant distance from him. Echo Key, thus, helps the villain tremendously, paving the way for his achievements by not only providing a way for his second appearance but leaving an enormous impact on a person, who is only partly associated with the Locke family.

3.5. Key That Alters Space

Keys are the objects that are typically known to be used to open doors and boxes. Although the keys mentioned in previous sections open something, their use is limited to items that keys are meant to be used on: Omega Key opens only the Black Door, and Echo Key is used only on the Wellhouse door. Moreover, the way keys look often represents their respective function. Head Key is illustrated as a head, Timeshift Key that teleports users to the past has a time-themed design and is used on the clock. When a reader is introduced to a new key, its use and function are discernible. The pattern seems to be universal within the story world. Yet, it appears to be a tendency rather than a strict rule.

Anywhere Key does not look like anything that a reader's mind is familiar with. A key with six full and five half-rings that are intertwined creates an odd shape that does not correlate with anything that is presented on a daily basis. Since "anywhere" is an abstract concept that is difficult to grasp visually, the reader cannot expect a clear representation of this notion. The name, however, clearly states its function – it takes the user anywhere they want if they can imagine an existing door in the place of their destination. In terms of their function, Black Door and Anywhere Key have a similar function, yet their results are different. While Black Door permanently transforms space behind it into a gate into another dimension, Anywhere Key changes space for a limited time while doors are open and later shifts it back to its usual parameters after

the door is closed. If I reuse an example from Chapter 2.1, imagining a basement while using Anywhere Key on the fifth floor would allow the user to travel there immediately. But for a different person, going through the same door later will lead to the room that should be there. The fundamental condition here, however, is to be familiar with the surroundings of the "exit" door, which further deviates this key from any other since an involvement of the user is required.

I have previously stated that Anywhere Key helps an antagonist in terms of sufficiency. It does not imply that this key is less important than others based on the assumption that all actors within the network are equally important and on the role this key plays.

Firstly, Anywhere Key allows one to avoid the rule that is applied in the Wellhouse – no soul is allowed to exit. Because of the key's property to create a different door and space on the other side, when echo passes, it inherently walks only towards the Wellhouse door, but not through it. Two doors are thus shared, and only the exiting one would count as the one being crossed through, creating a solution for an obstacle that was in the antagonist's way. This detail ties keys as actors not only to characters to whom they provide their power but to other keys as well. Certainly, all keys operate within one network of the Keyhouse, but they rarely directly influence the connections they establish. In this case, one key negates the condition of another.

Secondly, after getting the key into his possession, Dodge frequently uses it to utilize its power. He freely moves between locations and executes his plans against the Locke family while not raising their suspicions. The key allows him to ensure the safety of his real identity. Since he has a close relationship with the siblings, he uses his position to get what he wants through their trust. But he still uses Anywhere Key to operate as a "Wellhouse Lady" and gets keys in other ways. At school, an old teacher recognizes Lucas despite his new name. Lucas Caravaggio together with a few other members of the Keepers group were known to be killed in the incident in the cave in 1988. Because Dodge is afraid that the teacher would threaten his new disguise, he uses the key to get into the man's bathroom and kills him. The key saves him and enables him to travel between locations without the need for transportation and without spending any time on it. Moreover, he is able to enter places that are either guarded or locked. It helps him to commit crimes without being seen. The key is an actant between spaces, and through its connections in the network, it has an agency. Unlike any non-

magical key, Anywhere Key can fit into any lock and transforms spaces behind it. It provides something that any other key in its place cannot.

The antagonist's use of Anywhere Key helps him to avoid suspicion for a relatively long time. Protagonists did not know that Zach Wells, whom they trusted, in reality was Dodge and key allowed him to complete his plans while staying close to his enemies.

3.6. The Ghost Key

The last influential key that I would like to analyze is Ghost Key. It is the first key that Bode finds, which opens a strange door in the living room. Judging by the location, the door represents a back door that leads into the backyard. Visually, however, it has a striking depiction: a black door with little decoration and a skull on top of the frame and handle. The key is very similar in appearance. When Bode unlocks the door and goes through it, his body collapses on the floor near the entrance, and his soul exits the house instead. Thus, the name of the key corresponds to its function: it turns users into ghosts.

After accepting the fact that in the house some keys are magical and give new powers and possibilities, Bode uses Ghost Key for his amusement. When in a ghost state, he has no limitations in terms of movement; after using the key, he is able to fly and cross rooms directly through walls. With Ghost Key, he learns about the hardships that Tyler and Kinsey were going through after the loss of their father. He also finds a bracelet with Anywhere Key that Dodge asked him for when Sam Lesser returned.

When the soul leaves the body in this way, the body that stays in the house is lifeless. The antagonists used this key when Sam Lesser was attacking the family in the mansion in Lovecraft. Dodge threw dying Sam through the door, forcing his soul out of the body. This way, he could not be saved from the bleeding, and his body died. Without having a body to return to and having the door shut for a long period of time, Sam remained a ghost and roamed the manor around until he met Rufus. The betrayal of Dodge and the loss of his own life encouraged Sam to act against Dodge in the future, and he told Rufus how to defeat Dodge. For the antagonist, however, using Ghost Key provided a possibility for his future actions to happen by keeping Sam's

soul in the mansion, continuing to have a manipulated ally. While this event seems to have no significant narratological importance, it resulted in Dodge possessing Bode's body and his defeat by Rufus.

After Dodge's identity as Zach was revealed, he kidnapped Bode and brought him to the Ghost Door. This event is one of the turning points in the story. Dodge forced Bode to go through the door and join Sam in the ghost form, and through this, he switched three souls between two bodies. While Dodge had chosen to stay in the body of the boy, Sam, not knowing about the reveal of Dodge's identity, obtained the body of the antagonist. Bode is, thus, left in the ghost form. This switch demonstrates two key factors that influence the plot: after the exchange, Kinsey killed Zach's body, which resulted in the children being convinced that they had defeated their enemy, and Dodge was in the most favorable position for himself by pretending to be Bode. After that, he had no difficulties progressing his plans. The Ghost Key, thus, operates as a mediator between two realms by providing a means through which characters can alter their spiritual and physical state. However, similarly to the Omega Key, the Ghost Key functions jointly with the door to which it is attached.

As I have mentioned in Chapter 3.4., some keys produce different effects on those whose minds works differently. Because of his mental illness, Rufus is able to see the ghost of Sam in the manor when it was there. When they start talking, Sam reveals to Rufus that Zach is Dodge and tells him how to defeat him. After the climax of the story, Rufus is the one who frees Bode's body from a demon using the information gained from Sam.

The Ghost Key influences and changes not only a character as a whole, but both body and soul separately. Though the altering of the body is only temporal, as long as no soul enters the body, it is considered to be dead. The separation of two things is not a natural occurrence for a living being, and neither is the exchange of souls between bodies. Thus, it is a bridge between the human world and one that is known as "in-between." The user can freely enter and leave the ghost realm if it has any empty host body that remained unchanged on the other side. For the antagonist, this key was the most useful. If siblings had learned about his actions, they would not have been able to resist and fight against him, since the body belonged to their beloved little brother. The ground for the buildup to the climax was the event of Dodge getting Bode's body because no characters except Rufus realized that it was not Bode. Kinsey

and Tyler did not know that until the party in the cave when Dodge had all keys, including Omega Key.

The Ghost Key and all keys that I have mentioned in this work have agency: they provide conditions for the possibilities of actions that cannot be performed through any other means. In comparison to regular keys, there could be multiple copies for one keyhole, and each key will provide the same effect when used. However, magical keys cannot be substituted by any other key, nor their replica made. They are unique actors that make a difference. Five keys that I have mentioned change: a) characters (Kinsey's behavior and personality, Bode's physical state, Tyler's knowledge, Erin Voss's mental state), b) space (closing the portal into a different world, ability to travel anywhere where a door exists, creating an environment for souls of deceased people to exist). They influence already established connections in the network, for example, the layout of the mansion, that can be altered with Anywhere Key.

The keys' continuous narrative and visual presence differentiate them from other tools and objects that the characters use. Their unique contribution to the network that connects points of events in the plot structure marks them as entities that the reader can follow throughout the story. Thus, because of their narrative importance, elaborate influence on the plot and characters, and their agency, they can be considered the characters of the comic book.

4. Conclusion

Although comic books rely on pictures to tell their stories, labeling them as "art" ignores their communicative function. Similar, some comics that do not have textual elements are hard to be considered fine art either, for example, instructional comics on the back of each seat in an airplane. They have a stable function of communication, and literary comics, such as *Locke & Key*, are no different.

Based on the syntax of Visual Language, comics present narration through pictures and the spaces between them. Frames portray instances of setting or action, while through gutters, the reader makes inferences and views sequences as cohesive structures. The continuity of narration is established by visual repetition of setting and characters, the representation of their movement and body language, through the character's involvement in action and event, which constitute the subsequent following by the reader. Textual elements enhance and expand the visual narrative and vice versa. These aspects and the ability of the reader to set his own pace of reading determine comics as literature.

The continuous presence of keys throughout the comic book *Locke & Key* serves a narrative purpose. Their visual differentiation is not limited to the name and cover of the book, which, based on the rules of following an entity, points towards them being characters in the story.

Keys are an important medium in the network of the story world. Based on the Actor-Network Theory, they mediate actions which are considered to be impossible both in real life and in the story world of the comic book. They contribute to the network by establishing new connections or changing existent ones. With the example of many keys, it could be seen that they are different not only visually but functionally. The magical key's difference from the regular keys, however, is that they do not simply open various objects, but things that are not meant to be opened. With Head Key opening a person's head and giving access to their thoughts and emotions in a physical form is an example of how a specific key makes difference in a network. This key cannot be substituted by any other key to perform an action that it does, marking it as a one-of-a-kind mediator.

Although keys cannot do what they do without the character's assistance, the ability to influence space and natural order determines them as non-human actors.

Similar to main characters, keys are salient in two ways: the visual representation of each key is unique, compared to the background, they are very detailed; and their consistent presence in the visual setting and character's references. The reader, thus, can follow their presence in settings and scenes and witness their location and the ways in which they operate.

Keys mark characters and their action, change reality, and provide flow in action between main events. In an Actor-Network Theory, all actors in a network are essential and cannot be divided into more or less significant since they all contribute to the same network. However, through the successive examination of how keys operate, one can say that they are more important than a car or a pond in the mansion's backyard. This importance is narratological, which, in my opinion, underlines the keys role of characters.

For the sake of the length of a bachelor's thesis, many questions and aspects were not fully considered. While in this work I consider the "syntax" of panels and their narrative structure in Cohn's theory of Visual Grammar, to fully implement this theory into comics studies it is necessary to view the visual structure and how the way the pictures are presented relates to visual "vocabulary" too. Moreover, this work overlooks the socio-cultural and historical context of the analyzed comic book and thus does not review the comic book Locke & Key as a "middle ground reading" as well as does not provide a structural approach to visualizing connections in a network within a frame of Actor-Network Theory, which I would like to research and answer in a work of a larger scope.

Works Cited

Bencherki, Nicolas. "Actor–Network Theory." *The International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication*, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc002.

Carrier, David. *The Aesthetics of Comics*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.

Felski, Rita. "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory." Comparative Literature Studies 53, no. 4 (2016): 747–65. https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.53.4.0747.

Felski, Rita. "Latour and Literary Studies." *PMLA*, vol. 130, no. 3, 2015, pp. 737–742., www.jstor.org/stable/44015761.

Hatfield, Charles, Bart Beaty, and Isaac Cates. "The Graphic Novel." Essay. In *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, 82–94. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Hatfield, Charles, Bart Beaty, and Jan Baetens. "Words and Images." Essay. In *Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, 193–209. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Heer, Jeet, Kenton Worcester, and Pascal Lefèvre. "The Construction of Space in Comics." Essay. In *A Comics Studies Reader*, 155–62. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

Hill, Joe, and Rodríguez Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 1 – Welcome to Lovecraft*. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing 2009.

Hill, Joe, and Rodríquez, Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 2 – Head Games*. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2009.

Hill, Joe, and Rodríquez, Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 3 – Crown of Shadows*. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2011.

Hill, Joe, and Rodríquez, Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 4 – Keys to the Kingdom*. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2012.

Hill, Joe, and Rodríquez, Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 5 – Clockworks*. San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2013.

Hill, Joe, and Rodriquez, Gabriel. *Locke & Key: Volume 6 – Alpha & Omega.* San Diego, CA: IDW Publishing, 2014.

Latour, Bruno. "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications." *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163.

McCloud, Scott. *Invisible Art Understanding Comics*. NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

Meskin, Aaron. "Comics as Literature?" The British Journal of Aesthetics 49, no. 3 (July 2009): pp. 219-239. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayp026.

Meskin, Aaron. "Defining Comics?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (2007): 369–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-594x.2007.00270.x.

Mikkonen, Kai. *The Narratology of Comic Art*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Pizzino, Christopher. "The Doctor versus the Dagger: Comics Reading and Cultural Memory." *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 631–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44015748.

Pratt, Henry John. "Narrative in Comics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 1 (February 2009): 107–17. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6245.2008.01339.x.

Sayes, Edwin. "Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say That Nonhumans Have Agency?" Social Studies of Science 44, no. 1 (2014): 136. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43284223.

Wildfeuer, Janina, John A. Bateman, and Neil Cohn. "From Visual Narrative Grammar to Filmic Narrative Grammar: The Narrative Structure of Static and Moving Images." Essay. In *Film Text Analysis New Perspectives on the Analysis of Filmic Meaning*, 94–1117. London: Routledge, 2017.

Summary

This bachelor thesis deals with the role and influence of keys on characters and plot in the comic book *Locke & Key* through the lens of Latour's Actor-Network Theory. On the examples of five keys, this thesis describes the key's operation and the means by which they change characters and space around them. It also points out that on the basis of the network and connections within, keys are considered to be non-human actors with agency. Moreover, Chapter Three focuses on the possibility of viewing keys as characters because of their narrative and visual foregrounding. Before investigating the comic, its narration, and actors, in Chapter Two, this research is concerned with proving that the comic book *Locke & Key* is a medium within the literature by analyzing two dimensions in which comic medium operates. It provides proof based on the theory of Visual Narrative Grammar (VGN) and Visual Language (VL) proposed by Neil Cohn by providing the evidence that pictorial elements serve narrative purposes and follow the established rule of Canonical Narrative Schema, that is applied to all novels in prose. Subsequentially, this paper reviews the textual elements of the comic medium and states how they enhance the narration within comics. And lastly, this paper provides arguments supporting the narrative function of the comics medium through cohesion through setting and characters' movement, as well as proving that *Locke & Key* is a literary work.

This thesis is composed of four chapters, each of them dealing with different issues. Chapter One is introductory and states the purpose and methods used in this thesis. Chapter Two deals with comics in the comic medium and defines them as part of literary studies. It is subdivided into five parts. Part One describes and explains definitions of comics and problematic aspects that create difficulties in explaining a medium. Part Two describes the theory of Visual Grammar and how it ensures the narrative function of comics through pictorial elements. Part Three focuses on the descriptive role of the pictorial dimension and shows how different types of space in comics influence narration. Part Four investigates the ways in which characters, their depiction, thoughts, and movement further ensure cohesive narration in comics. Lastly, Part Five deals with the textual aspect and its realization in comics. Chapter Three is subdivided into six parts and deals with the role and influence of inanimate objects (keys) in the comic book *Locke & Key*. The first Part introduces and explains the Actor-Network Theory and specifies how it could be applied in literary analysis.

Part Two introduces the plot of the comic book *Locke & Key* and describes its importance for the theory application. Parts Three, Four, Five, and Six focus on the analysis of five different inanimate keys in relation to the plot and characters and argues for the keys' narrative importance and ability to be a prominent part of the story, and the conclusions of this thesis are drawn in the Chapter Four.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rolí a vlivem klíčů na postavy a děj v komiksu *Locke & Key* za pomoci Latourovy Actor-Network Teorie. Na příkladech pěti klíčů tato práce popisuje jejich funkci a prostředky, kterými mění postavy a prostor kolem sebe. Poukazuje také na to, že na základě sítě a propojení v ní jsou klíče považovány za činitele, i když se jedná o neživé objekty. Třetí kapitola se mimo jiné zaměřuje i na možnost zobrazení klíčů jako postav dílu kvůli jejich narativní a vizuální funkci. Před zkoumáním samotného komiksu, jeho vyprávění a herců se snažím prokázat ve druhé kapitole, že komiks *Locke & Key* je médiem v rámci literatury, a to analýzou dvou dimenzí, ve kterých komiksové médium působí. Poskytuji důkaz založený na teorii Visual Narrative Grammar (VGN) a Visual Language (VL) navržené Neilem Cohnem. Práce poskytuje důkazy, že obrazové prvky slouží narativním účelům a řídí se zavedeným pravidlem narativního schématu, které je rovněž aplikováno na všechny romány. Následně tato práce přezkoumává textové prvky komiksového média a uvádí, jak vylepšují vyprávění v komiksu. Práce také poskytuje argumenty podporující narativní funkci komiksového média prostřednictvím soudržnosti postav a jejích pohybu, a také dokazuje, že *Locke & Key* je literární dílo.

Tato práce se skládá ze čtyř kapitol, z nichž každá se zabývá jinou problematikou. První kapitola je úvodní a uvádí účel a metody použité v této práci. Druhá kapitola se zabývá komiksovým médiem a vymezuje jej jako součást literární vědy. Tato kapitola je rozdělena do pěti částí. První část popisuje a vysvětluje definice komiksu a problematické aspekty, které způsobují potíže při vysvětlování tohoto média. Druhá část popisuje teorii Visual Narrative Grammar (VGN) a Visual Language (VL), díky níž je zajištěna narativní funkce komiksu prostřednictvím obrazu. Třetí část se zaměřuje na popisnou funkci obrázků a ukazuje, jak různé typy prostoru v komiksu ovlivňují jejích vyprávění. Čtvrtá část zkoumá jak postavy, jejich vyobrazení, myšlenky a pohyb zajišťují plynulé vyprávění v komiksech. Nakonec se pátá část zabývá textovým aspektem a jeho realizací v komiksu. Kapitola třetí je rozdělena do šesti částí a pojednává o roli a vlivu neživých předmětů, zejména klíčů, v komiksu *Locke & Key*. První část představuje a vysvětluje Actor-Network teorii a specifikuje, jak by mohla být aplikována v literární analýze. Druhá část představuje děj komiksu *Locke & Key* a popisuje jeho význam pro aplikaci teorie. Část třetí, čtvrtá, pátá a šestá se zaměřuje na analýzu pěti různých klíčů ve vztahu k zápletce a postavám a

argumentují pro narativní důležitost klíčů a jejich schopnost být prominentní součástí příběhu. Závěry této práce jsou ve čtvrté kapitole.