# TRANSCENDING MEDIA: ANALYSIS CONCERNING THE ADAPTATION OF *HARAP-ALB* ROMANIAN FAIRY TALE IN COMIC FORMAT

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*Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the Romanian fairy tale Harap-Alb and its contemporary comic adaptation Harap Alb Continuă. The popular misconception that comics are children literature is nowadays outdated; reading has become an experience far beyond that of words only. The graphic format is well-suited for this new paradigm and ready to seize it, establishing at the same time a convincing connection with various age groups and nationalities. Ion Creangă's characters are perfect for a superhero comic. They possess supernatural abilities, come from diverse backgrounds and have different addictions, defying the concept of Ubermensch. Though, the style is different, digital-like, and the way in which the characters are depicted is realistic, tracing no grotesque. Characters' special skills are the result of some personal drama, of mistakes committed in their youth, which is why the target group of the adapted version are not only teenagers, but also adults with life experience, who can easily identify with the characters, that are not completely positive or negative. The narrative remains pseudo realistic, magic is a secondary phenomenon, and hence the adaptation status of the story. This paper explores the connection with the original fairy tale in three ways: content, structure and function. It explores the graphic use of anthropomorphism, the manners in which stereotyping can be employed for narrative purposes, what is gained and lost when a fairy tale is adapted into a graphic format, and how conventional narrative elements can be disrupted for rhetorical effect using visual devices. These modern visual storytelling techniques, due to advanced technology, both build on and alter the fairy tale tradition. The paper also suggests that the* comic format *is an example of a unique form of tale telling, which uses the visual framework to highlight aspects of the original work and opens windows into fresh and even unexpected perspectives. The result is that readers are then able to experience the story in new ways, with a broader understanding of and an increased appreciation for both the original work and the new creation, which is why the paper will conclude upon the benefits that would be brought to the educational field, too.*

*Keywords: Harap-Alb, comics, adaptation, Ion Creangă, fairy tale*

## Introduction

The comic strip *The White Moor Continues* is a moral continuation of the classical fairy tale by Ion Creangă. This is not the first attempt to illustrate and adapt into a different medium the well-known story, as there have previously been calendars, stamps, coloring books, filmstrips, records, tapes, 3D animations, plays, films, ballet shows etc., all inspired by the original story. The fairy tale was illustrated over time by graphic artists like Ary Murnu (1924), D. Stoica (1936), Sandu Florea (1979), Filimon Hamuraru (1985) etc., each conveying his personal vision and style. The representations of the main character relied each time on the period of time and the trend; the White Moor would have either dark or fair hair, be either strong or frail, dressed as a medieval prince, as Robin



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Hood or even in peasant garments. The comic representation of *The White Moor* shows a computer-game or fantasy movie-like character, bringing him closer to the modern reader's world. Unlike American common superheroes, The White Moor's exceptional features are not due to superpowers, but to his ability to overcome exceptional situations. Ion Creangă's characters make it perfect for a group of superheroes, but their success relies deeply on creating a bound between the reader and the superhero. The modern reader should identify with the heroes and heroes in return with the reader's current concerns (Florea 37-38). A fairytale is nothing but mirroring life in fabulous ways (Călinescu). There is much to learn from The White Moor's journey to maturity, even if the fabulous prevails. He is naïve and inexperienced, but at the same showing intelligence, altruism, patience, adaptability, and loyalty (Ungureanu 40).

The other characters are carved following the American superhero pattern; they have an extensive back story, inner conflicts and are often excluded from the community.

**Changes operated in structure and content**

Creangă's story is retold in a contemporary style while maintaining the basics: the characters, the storyline and the bildungsroman nature, altering and adding items to augment the reality presented. In addition to retelling this story, the adaptation aims to create an entire fantasy universe of Dacian origin. The adaptation is divided into four parts and preserves the fairy tale basic narrative thread set by the Russian theorist Tzvetan Todorov and used by Ion Creangă: a state of equilibrium, a disruption of that order by an event, recognition that the disorder has occurred, an attempt to repair the damage of the disruption, return or restoration of a new equilibrium. The initial situation is disrupted by the letter received from the Green Emperor. The letter is visually rendered in the comics in its physical shape and, more than conveying an element in the story, it is both a symbol and a narrative bridge, important because it is necessary that the rhythm, a visual language, flows undisturbed (Eisner 17-19).

The range of characters in the adaptation slightly varies from the original tale. They are identified by names and, parallel to the main narrative, there is also present a background story for each of the White Moor's companions, which explains their actual state and the source of their special ability. There is also an extra scene inserted - White Moor's short stay in the Purgatory, before being resurrected by the Red Emperor's daughter, who is also credited for obtaining the Living Water, unlike the original story.

**The characters**

The reader is introduced in the complex and supernatural elements-filled world of the story even before getting to know about it through the act of reading; the cover of the comic strip's first issue abounds with armed characters, and except for a more down-to-earth, displaying a thoughtful attitude one in the foreground, the others exhibit violence, possess impossible weapons or physical features, such as having one eye only, a tail, blue skin, flying, or casting spells.

Romanian mythological influences are mostly felt in presenting the story behind the characters, and in the choice of character names: The White Moor is called Ştefan, Red Emperor's daughter - Mara, Flămânzilă - Lardea, Gerilă – Miron, Ochilă – Haiganu,



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Setilă – Mârza, Păsări-Lăţi-Lungilă – Baian, Sfânta Duminică – Nedelia. By changing their names, the characters are humanized, though preserving their fantastic features.

Each character has superpowers at least comparable to those of the American comics' heroes – frosting breath, super-sight, super-stretching etc., with the major difference that they are Romanian culture driven characters which deserve the best of the Romanian public attention.

The main character, The White Moor, is representative for the myth of double identity, frequently found in the original fairy tale. The choice of name for him, Ştefan, can be explained by the etymology of the name. In Greek Στέφανος means *crown*. The multitude of positive traits compensates his inexperience, though his naivety unleashes the intrigue of the plot: the association with The Bald Man. Despite not having special abilities, Ştefan is a native leader, easy going, whose physical appearance corresponds to his moral portrait: tall, blond with blue eyes, athletic, excellent wielder of the sword and dagger, skillful rider. These skills recommend him as a good strategist and king. The authors acknowledge that *Getica*, by Vasile Parvan was the main source of inspiration in shaping the graphic and narrative elements, some having Dacian and pre-Dacian origin, such as the The White Moor's sword, dagger and even small details, as his cloak's fibulae (Ungureanu 40).

Mara, the Red Emperor's daughter possesses supernatural anthropomorphizing powers. She has a rebellious, strong personality, defying traditional rules and customs. Her clothes are red, denoting passion and eroticism. Her seductive outfit emphasizes her status of *femme fatale*.

The Bald Man is a cunning character, with no moral principles, from the Moro's nation. He has a generally snaky aspect (yellow lenticular eyes, long and thin whiskers) and a pronounced hissing, another similarity to this reptile. The Bald Man is a master of disguise, and this helps him to mislead the White Moor and earn his confidence. The Bald Man is a successful character, with a mysterious background, able to intrigue readers and make them ask questions. His physique is an interesting combination of famous villains as Lord Voldemort and Fu Manchu, other famous negative characters in the comics' world.

Because Ion Creangă was less generous in his description of Lardea (Flămânzilă), the comic authors have rethought the character, as a dwarf miner with an enormous appetite. There is a similarity with the legendary gnomes of J. R. R. Tolkien's literature, in the place of living and his incredible hunger. His favorite weapon is a modified cleaver, an influence from the famous *Lord of the Rings*. The exaggerated appetite comes from childhood, being caused by his peers. Frustrated and eager to assert, he begins to consume everything in his way, which increases his height up to 2.8 meters. His parents are of different races, and this is crucial for his personality development as well as for other characters in the adaptation. Interracial conflicts are a problem widely addressed here. They are the main cause of the action and wars in the story.

Miron, said Frost, is a dual origin character, with a father - man and a mother - giant. His description is mainly influenced by the Norse mythology. His striking appearance prevents him from properly integrating into the community and Ştefan's heterogeneous gang seems the perfect environment to show off his capabilities. Prior to meeting Ştefan, he is a mercenary who spends his earning on toys for poor children,



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evoking the myth of Santa Claus. Red haired, with white eyes lacking irises, Miron makes a powerful opponent, heir of the Viking traditions. This character is the result of combining Norse and Slavic mythology features.

The only deistic character, Haiganu, is a local omniscient Cyclops, perhaps the most powerful in Ștefan's gang. His origins trace back in the Dacian mythology, his father being Gebeleizis, the god of lightning. After losing the war with Pleistoros, the god of war, he is exiled to Earth. Banished from heaven, he learns to appreciate the friendliness of people. He has a superiority complex, determined by its status as a god, so he finds it difficult to accept the authority of others.

**Visual devices and their rhetorical effect**

As expected in the case of such a medium, the adaptation lacks many of the marks of Creangă's original style, as well as the typical humour, the proverbs, old sayings, regionalisms and archaisms, author's direct intervention and his irony. Also, fairy tale's specific opening and closing phrases are missing, as well as the long dialogues and the descriptive passages. Though, it is acknowledge that in any graphic representation the artist is free to omit dialogue or narrative that can be clearly demonstrated visually, as the background art is more than just stage setting; it is part of the narration. The viewer can supply by himself the dialogue evoked by the images; precise language doesn't come first (Eisner 25).

While in the original fairy tale *description* is the main device intended to specifically capture each detail, from sound to attitude and appearance, the acoustic dimension is differently rendered in comics, through using plentiful onomatopoeic words, whose style provides the desired emotional effect, adding thrill by thinning or thickening letters, increasing or decreasing fonts' size. Their purpose is to add sounds, a dimension not really available to the printed medium, while symbols like *?!?* are used as thoughts rather than speech (Eisner 18).

For example, in the settings at the beginning of the comic series, the thundering THUUU **DOOM**, is represented as two separate sounds, the first of a lower intensity than the second. THUUU contains thinner letters compared to the bold and irregularly sized **DOOM.** Other examples are the sounds of sword blades in battle **CLING - CLANG**, vigorous combat sound **AAAAARGH!!!,** bear's roar **GRRROAAAARRR,** Nedelia's scattering in a cloud of sand **PFFFFF**, some of them even employing additional punctuation marks to enhance the intensity (see fig. 1.a).

The fonts' style also plays an important role in speech and intonation, as well as in marking key elements or characters in the story. **THE GREEN EMPEROR, THE RED MAN, THE BALD MAN,** they are all written in bold. Also, when the oldest of the three sons feels entitled to be sent on the coveted journey, he earnestly asks his father LET **ME** GO; the bold **me** approaches the best to the naturalness of exclamation in free speech, capturing the essence of both intonation and meaning.



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a) 

b) 


Fig. 1.a) The use of onomatopoeia (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album) b) Normal vs. bold fonts (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

DON'T KILL ME, **SON**! The desperate crying of the defeated emperor disguised in the bear skin eventually invokes the key word **son**, as a mean of saving his life, even with the risk of revealing his identity (see fig.1.b).

The size of the fonts is also employed to highlight the distance between characters within a single panel[1]. The scene where the oldest son receives his father's blessing for setting off the journey is presented from the emperor's balcony, from where he addresses his son, while his son replies from the yard. In this case the emperor's words are represented by larger size fonts than those of his son's (see fig.2).

A special use of fonts occurs in the scene of Ştefan's short passage through Purgatory before him being resurrected by the Red Emperor's daughter. Most of the fonts used in that scene are coloured in red, while the ones addressed by greater entities are blue, thus delineating the three worlds of the sacred, humans and death.

The arrangement and format of the panels and of speech balloons[2] are other important means of conveying ideas and meaning in the graphic adaptation.

There are panels which lack speech balloons, especially during action scenes, where speed forces the reader to supply the dialogue. Also, the shape of the panel frame or its absence is used not only as a stage for the action, but as a mean of involving the reader in the narrative, emphasizing the sensory dimension.




Fig. 2. Use of different font size to emphasize distance (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

[1] Panel – a box or frame which contains a different scene
[2] Speech balloon – the container of the text-dialogue spoken by character



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A high panel reinforces the illusion of height as well as a long one the length, while a character bursting out of the confines of the panel, an inviolable device in the comics, highlights unleashed power (see fig. 3).

a) 

b) 
c) 

Fig. 3. a) Long panel b) High panel c) Exceeded panel (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

Open panels[3] are often used in order to narate the space, time and location, as in the scene of Ștefan's separation from his companions, before entering the Green Kingdom: the images of both the place where they separate and the kingdom show the distance between the two locations, inferring the short time that would take to reach the destination. Another use of the open panels is to suggest the dimension of a place or situation (see fig. 4).

a) 
b) 

Fig. 4. a) Open panel emphasizing distance and time b) Open panel revealing the grandeur of the Red Emperor's kingdom (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

Facial expressions of astonishment (Ștefan amazed at the horse transformation), or during crucial moments (the bear waking up in the salad garden), or affecting the narrative (Ștefan shaking hands with Miron) - require close-up[4], zooming (Eisner 21). This is a device specific to photography, as well as blurring elements inside a panel which are not very relevant for that particular scene (see fig. 5).

[3] Open panel – a frameless panel
[4] Close-up – a closer view or examination of something



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a)  b)  c) 

Fig. 5. a) Close-up panel of facial expressions b) Close-up panel of crucial moments c) Blurred elements (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

Time is an integrated dimension to comics. As in the human consciousness, it combines with space and sound. Whereas in different forms of auditory communication *rhythm* is related to the temporality, in graphics this experience is rendered by the use of illusions, symbols and their arrangement (Eisner 28-30).

The notion of time is rendered in the adaptation through employing recognized images taken out of familiar experience, which convey action - footprints, smoke, and time - the moon, the sunrise (Eisner, 20) (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Graphic elements to render action and time: footprints, moon (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

Also, the colours used in rendering the specificity of various kingdoms along with their inhabitants (green, red), the middle son's waving cloak during his rushed horseback riding in the speed stream, they all are narrative devices and are part of the adaptation's visual language (Eisner 25) (see fig.7).

a)  b) 

Fig. 7. a) Colours symbolism b) Speed stream as a narrative device (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)



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The lettering inside the speech balloon and even the speech balloon's own shape reflect the nature and emotion of the speech, so they are mostly meant to capture characters' feelings. The normal speech balloon is the most common device found in the adaptation, followed by the thought balloon, which contains unspoken speech and the jagged edges balloon, which comprises loud and sharp sounds or desperate speech or howling (Eisner 27) (see fig. 8).

a)  b)  c) 

Fig. 8. a) Normal speech balloon b) Thought balloon c) Jagged edges balloon (*Harap Alb Continuă* - Album)

In addition, there are used different perspectives to manipulate the reader's orientation and to produce various emotional states, influenced by his position as a spectator: the eye-level perspective to reinforce realism, whose purpose is to inform the reader; the over-head perspective, which provides a clear view of the settings, the reader acting as an observer; the ground-level perspective, which involves the reader in the impact of the action, inducing a sense of smallness and fear (see fig. 9). The same way function narrow panels, suggesting imprisonment, while wide panels make space, provide escape.

a)  b)  c) 


Fig. 9. a) Eye-level perspective b) Over-head perspective c) Ground-level perspective (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

These are some changes operated by the authors in order to bring comics closer to its readers. The revival and popularity enjoyed today by the medieval fantasy style helped the adaptation to reach success, as it falls particularly in that genre.



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**Conclusions**

The first four comic strip issues have managed to cover the entire subject of the original tale, while from the fifth issue, the intention is to present the true *White Moor Continues*, with a more experienced Ştefan, visibly changed after the experience of death.

Unknowingly, the young reader undertakes the hero's journey, experiencing the reality of the facts which take him from ignorance and innocence to adulthood. The fictional world in the fairy tale initiates the reader into the laws of the human relationships, confronting existences and values. The world of the story is built on a certain stereotype of characters and themes that the reader expresses sympathy or antipathy for, binding or rejecting ethical models, hence, the effectiveness in educating children. This educational character of the fairy tale is not downplayed in the comics, though the main aim of the adaptation is bringing back the popular values and the sense of adventure (Ionaşcu 2) in a form that better suits the taste of the new generation, by using specific artistic devices and the conceptual universe of the modern readers (Niţă 26). The main stated target public was the 16 to 30 years old active youth, living in the urban areas, with middle and above average incomes, sharing modern hobbies such as movies, internet, computer games etc. The secondary target public was divided into two categories: 8 to 15 years old students willing to understand fairy tales other than by the traditional scholarly means, and 30 to 56 years old nostalgic urban adults, movies, books and music consumers, seeking any means of promoting national values (*Harap Alb Continuă* Presentation leaflet 11). The statistics now show that the comic strip mainly reached the public aged 18 to 24 (see fig. 10).

The comic strip is illustrated in the DC Comics and MARVEL style, an entertaining, accessible and comprehensible way for the modern audience to raise characters to superheroes.

The effort of promoting this comic strip in important social media, creating a website and adopting various other modern marketing methods, have made an important contribution to its rapid spread among readers, as evidenced by the considerable number of fans. (see fig. 10)

At the same time, it can be seen that the interest in this type of publication was higher during the occurrence of numbers 1-4, which represented the fairy tale adaptation, while the continuation of The White Moor's adventures, starting with number 5 of the comic strip, apparently did not enjoy the same success. However, the large number of fans (approximately 97 000), within a relatively short time (September 2012 – November 2013), shows that comics, especially the adaptations of classics, contribute as a proof of the reaffirmation of our national literary values and of their immortality regardless of changing technological times.



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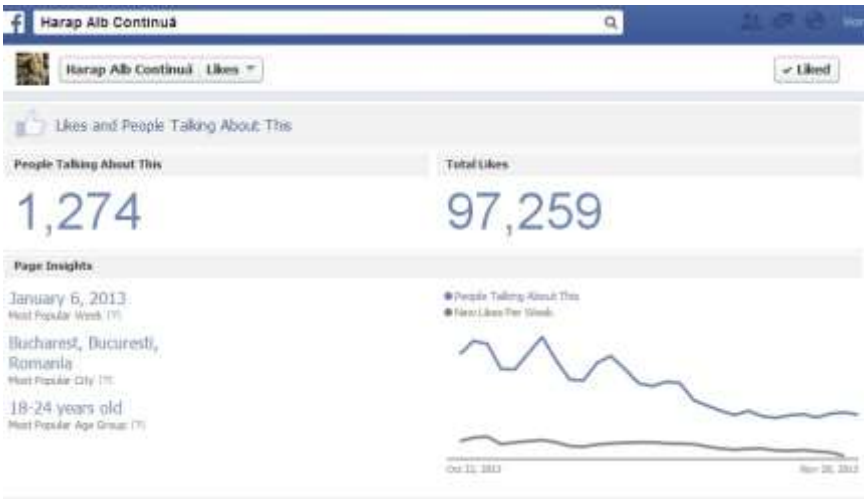



Fig. 10. The impact of *The White Moor Continue*s comics on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/revistaharapalbcontinua/likes)

If we relate this assertion to the pedagogical dimension, it can be stated that the interest in comics could be exploited within literature classes in schools, of course only as an alternative educational resource. In addition, as *The White Moor* fairy tale is found as an obligatory literary work at the high school level in Romania, as well as in the Baccalaureate syllabus, therefore the understanding of classics through as many media is welcome and not to be neglected. Given that in America and Western Europe, comics are nowadays already regarded as an alternative method of learning, in the process of or even already introduced as part of the curriculum at all levels of education, there is no reason to diminish or exclude this possibility in the Romanian educational system, too.

In the years 1890-2002 the interest in Creangă's work was huge, and his editing will definitely continue in the future too, in even more varied forms facilitated by the new technologies, as a classic of literature will never cease to be read.

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